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OF THE
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GILLIE

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THE STORY OF THE
HEBREW PROPHETS
(GOD'S LANTERN-BEARERS)

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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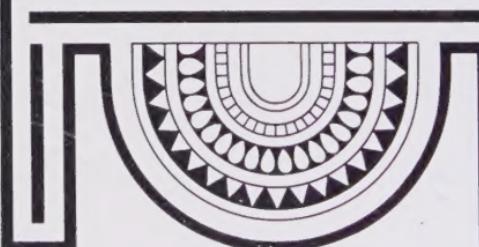
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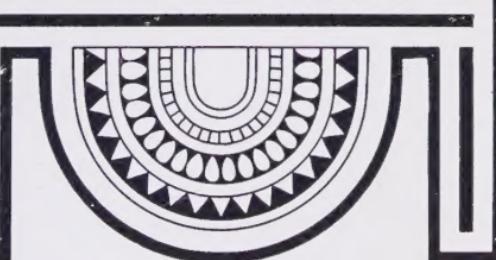
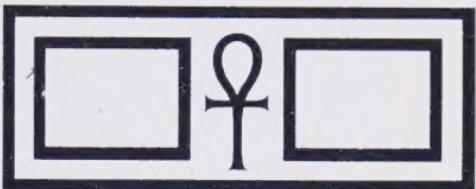
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THE STORY OF THE HEBREW PROPHETS

(God's Lantern-Bearers)

BY

R. C. GILLIE, M.A., D.C.L.

AUTHOR OF 'THE STORY OF STORIES' AND
'THE KINSMEN AND FRIENDS OF JESUS'



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TO
ANNIS, DARSIE, AND BLAISE

PREFACE TO FIRST EDITION

THIS is the third in a little series of volumes, of which 'The Story of Stories' and 'The Kinsfolk and Friends of Jesus' are the first and second. It is intended that they should be read, not chronologically, but in the order of publication. 'The Story of Stories' is a life of Christ suitable for children from the age of seven. 'The Kinsfolk and Friends of Jesus' is a narrative of the life and work of the Apostles for those a little older. This volume is for young people, and it is hoped it may be found interesting by children of the age of ten or eleven.

'God's Lantern-Bearers' has been written with a two-fold aim. In the first place, the attempt has been made to present the story of the Hebrew prophets in an attractive and lucid form. This part of the Old Testament is for many a tangled wilderness, to which they with difficulty find a clue, however much they may find delight in isolated portions of it. This volume seeks to give a thread of guidance which may render the whole both intelligible and interesting. At the same time, it emphasizes that a stream of Divine revelation was flowing through elect minds for a thousand years and more, in preparation for the coming of

our Lord. That this stream flowed throughout the centuries, and grew wider and deeper, clearer and purer, as it flowed, is the unassailible fact which emerges above all the discussions of the Old Testament. Young minds cannot be familiarized too soon with such a certainty.

In the second place, an effort has been made to give to children a point of view from which the historical and moral difficulties of the Old Testament will be seen to sink into insignificance, if they do not quite disappear. It is believed that those who have learned to think of the older portion of their Bible in the fashion here presented will not suffer any serious dislocation of faith, when they come to face the prevailing theories and acknowledged facts with which mature minds are familiar.

The task is avowedly difficult, though obviously necessary. My only excuses for attempting it must be long experience in preaching to children and in teaching Bible-classes; also the degree of approval which has been accorded to the previous volumes of the series.

It is needless to say that this book makes no pretence to originality, and does not attempt to argue. That would only defeat its purpose. It is from the atmosphere of a volume which to a large extent is absorbed unconsciously that many of us, and not least children, gain most.

I have to acknowledge obligations to many volumes, but particularly to the works of Professor George Adam Smith, from which I have once or twice borrowed translations in preference to those of the Authorized or Revised Versions. My wife has been of the greatest assistance, both as critic and helper. Without her aid the book could not have been written.

NOTE TO REISSUE OF 1923

This volume is reissued because of a new demand for a work of this character. Apparently it has been of more use to adults, especially to parents and teachers, than was anticipated. Possibly it has been of less use to children than was expected. A book of this kind with the modern outlook on Holy Scripture will however be increasingly necessary in Christian households, as Bible-lessons are given almost exclusively from the new point of view in our Secondary and Public Schools. It is hoped that 'The Story of the Hebrew Prophets' may supply this necessity.

R. C. GILLIE.

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GOD'S LANTERN-BEARERS

CHAPTER I

THE LANTERNS AND THE GREAT LIGHT

UPON some cold winter evening, when darkness was hanging like black velvet upon lane and field, have you ever had to start from a house in the country to drive into a neighbouring town? If you were curious, and wished to see the horses yoked to the carriage, you would grope your way into the stable-yard to discover the coachman, who, by the yellow light of the dim stable lantern, was looking to the harness. A little later, driving along a familiar road now blotted from your sight, you would see a small space lit up on either side by the carriage-lamps, which, on examination, you might find to be only candles, but so magnified in power by a silver reflector

that the little flames are flung vividly upon the night.

A little farther on, your eye is caught by three or four red lights at the roadside, and, pressing your face to the misty window-pane, you discover these to be lanterns, with red panes of glass, hung upon a rude, temporary fence to protect the traveller from the trench that has been dug to receive some water-pipes. Very shabby things these lanterns are, but none the less useful for that. Without them the wheel had been over the edge and the carriage overturned.

Later still, the mystery of the darkness is broken by the fringing lights of the great city, and presently you are rattling through the very streets and pass the gas-lamps standing at regular intervals like soldiers. And, last of all, the horses are pulled up at the hostel, where you are to rest awhile, and you step out into the white brilliance of a great electric globe, which is suspended above the entrance, and makes the night almost as clear as the day.

But if, instead of going to bed, you could sit up and watch the coming of the dawn, you would

see how pale and miserable these lights would look, dwindling into nothing before the rising sun. They are needed no longer now, for the darkness has altogether fled away, and the greatest lamp of all is hung high above the world in a blue sky.

Yet all these lights were of very real use. Without the stable lantern, which was dimmest of all, you could never have started on your journey. The carriage-lamps with their reflectors showed you the road ; the red-paned lanterns above the trench kept you out of danger ; the gas-lamps of the streets showed you the kerb of the pavements and dispelled the gloom of the high houses, which half shut out the stars ; the great electric globe welcomed you cheerfully to the place of rest, so that you should not miss it. All these did you service before the rising of the sun, and, if you think, you will remember that each light that served you on your journey was stronger than the one before.

Now, our Lord Jesus Christ is the Light of the World. He is the Sun in the sky of the soul, and since His coming we have not needed the prophets to be lantern-bearers. Men only

need to go forth into the open and point to Him and cry, 'See, there is the Sun. Come out of your dark hovels of wickedness and misunderstanding. Daylight is here.'

Some people, it is true, still continue to carry and watch some little lamp of their own making, and trouble themselves very much to trim it and keep it alight. I mean that they have some little religion of their own which, they will tell you, is better than that of the Lord Who died for us and loves us. But they are as foolish as the man who insists upon keeping the lamp lit when the sun blazes through his windows. If he is even to see this feeble light of his, he must keep his blinds down and draw his curtains close.

But before the coming of Jesus the lantern-bearers were needed. Some of the prophets showed the people how to set out upon the good way ; others shed light upon the road of righteousness for men travelling along it, that they might not wander down some treacherous by-path ; others showed the dangers even in the road itself ; and yet others showed where the home of peace lay, and how men might enter in. Each prophet had his own piece of work to do. Some among

them shed only a little light, for they had only a little truth to declare; but it served its purpose, and pointed the way to greater truth, and saved the people from peril until the shining forth of the great Light by which all men could walk.

And though we live in the glad rays of the true knowledge of Jesus Christ, it is good to look back and see what was the work of God's lantern-bearers in the old, dark days. We learn to understand how God can use a very little light for His glory when it shines in the right place and in the right way. And when we see the knowledge of His love and goodness grow stronger and stronger as the centuries come and pass and die, we understand a little better how patient God is, and how carefully He prepared people little by little to rejoice in the brightness of the Sun's rising, which was the coming of His own Son.

This is the story I have to tell you. If you read and understand it, you will be more ready than ever before to praise the Father in heaven that you were born in these blessed days, when you need not grope your slow way to Him,

but can go straight forward, looking to His Son. Sometimes, too, you will learn to remember some truth more clearly because a prophet's lantern shone on it alone, and left everything else in shadow, just as after your midnight journey you remembered very clearly some cottage or turn of the road because the light, though dim, fell upon it and all the rest was dark.

CHAPTER II

WHAT IS MEANT BY A PROPHET

Exod. iv, vii. 1 Sam. ix, x.

You are going to hear the wonderful story of the prophets of Israel and Judah—how brave they were, what they suffered, and how they made God known to their people. But, to enter into the story, you must first understand what is meant by a prophet.

Many people think that a prophet's chief work was to predict—that is, to tell what was going to happen. But that was only a small part of his task. He also had to explain to the nation how God had been training and teaching it in years gone by. The prophet thus gave people eyes to see the presence of God in their past history. This was specially important, for God had chosen out this little nation from among all the nations, that it might know Him and make Him known

to all the world. A prophet had also to point out to his fellow-citizens their present duty—how they should live so as to please God. This was most of all necessary when the nation was in danger or fell into evil ways, and forgot that God was willing to take care of them and protect them if only they would do the right. It was the prophet's task, then, not merely to tell what was going to happen in coming years, but also to interpret the past and to guide in the present. The prophet was God's spokesman ; not only *foreteller*, but *forthteller* of God's will.

Fortunately for us, there is one verse of Scripture which makes quite plain what this word 'prophet' means. When Moses was chosen by God to be the deliverer of his fellow-Israelites from the land of Egypt, he was most unwilling to obey, and one of his excuses was that he was a very bad speaker, and could not make people listen to him. God answered him by saying : ' Is not Aaron the Levite thy brother ? I know that he can speak well, and thou shalt speak with him and put words in his mouth. I will be with thy mouth and with his mouth, and will teach ye what ye shall do. And he shall be

thy spokesman unto the people, and he shall be to thee instead of *a mouth*, and thou shalt be to him instead of God.' Later, God said to Moses: 'See, I have made thee a god to Pharaoh; and Aaron, thy brother, shall be thy prophet.' We see from these words that the 'prophet' of a god means the same as the 'spokesman' of a god, or, as it is put so vividly here, a 'prophet' is the 'mouth' by which a Silent One speaks. Aaron sometimes told Pharaoh what would happen if the people of Israel were not allowed to go free, but a great deal that he said referred to Pharaoh's faults in the past, and to his immediate duty. Just so, the prophets were God's spokesmen for every kind of message.

We must always remember that there were not a few false prophets who said what they did not know to be true, and many others who made a profession of prophesying, caring only to please the king and the people, and to say what was expected of them. Their thought was for what they could get for themselves. They feared to offend anyone for fear they should lose the gifts by which they lived. It was not always easy to distinguish true from false prophets, and perhaps

you will come to understand best what the true prophets were, by seeing wherein they differed from the false even when most alike.

You have, perhaps, seen pictures of dancing dervishes. These men belong to the Mohammedan religion, and their dancing is part of their worship. At certain times, and under the excitement of certain kinds of music, they begin to whirl round and round faster and faster. They seem to the onlookers to become half mad with excitement, and to change entirely from the quiet-looking persons they were before they began that strange kind of worship. Now, some, at least, of the prophets of the nations round Israel appear to have acted a little like the dervishes. Under the influence of music they sought to lose themselves in a wild excitement, shouting and singing and leaping. Perhaps they thought that the gods they worshipped would hear them more readily. Certainly the onlookers were inclined to believe that these shouting, singing men, when least under their own control, were under the influence of their god. Anything they said when in this state was listened to with great attention and reverence.

ANTICHRIST, OR THE FALSE PROPHET.

FROM THE FRESCO BY LUCA SIGNORELLI IN THE CATHEDRAL OF ORVIETO.



Now, in the land of Israel some of the prophets, especially those who went about in companies, behaved very like the heathen prophets. They did not know any better. They really thought that God was nearer to them, and was possessing them, when they fell into a trance or were half drunk with excitement. This was not the case. But it was certainly true that when men forgot everything else and lost themselves in worship, they were then better able to receive from God the message He wished to impart to the people. Sometimes God's own prophets sought the same aid in music and in singing. You may read that a king asked Elisha to give him God's guidance as to an expedition on which the army was about to set forth. Elisha asked that a minstrel should begin to play. I suppose the prophet hoped that while he listened to the music he would be able to forget the king, and the glittering spears, and the host of soldiers, and understand more clearly the will of God. Sometimes, too, the more ignorant of the prophets would begin to play and leap and sing, and become half frenzied, and speak they scarcely knew what in praise of God. It seemed to them that God was speaking

through them, and this was called 'prophesying.' When other people heard their strange cries, the very strangeness of it impressed them with a belief in heavenly inspiration. When this worship was sincere, God did not disdain it, however uncouth. Sometimes he honoured such untaught earnestness by using it.

Once, after Saul had visited Samuel for the first time, and Samuel had told him he was one day to be king, he met a band of these wandering prophets, who were marching together to the sound of a pipe and harp and other musical instruments. Saul had never cared for these people before, and perhaps had rather despised them. But he was himself very excited that day because of what Samuel had told him, and was feeling very solemn and earnest and eager to know more of God. As he met these people, he could not help listening to them and walking with them. Then he, too, began to sing and shout as they did, and, before he knew what he was doing, he was behaving as if one of them. He had always been a proud young yeoman, eager to use his strength as a soldier should. But in his desire to be a better man, he forgot his

pride and his beautiful strong body, and was one with the poor dishevelled prophets. The people were so surprised to see this soldierly youth in such unusual company that his action gave rise to a proverb with them. When a man was seen doing anything very unusual, especially for the sake of religion, they used to say, 'Is Saul also among the prophets?' You may ask, 'Did Saul really come nearer to God when he joined in this excitement?' We must believe that he did just because he was so much in earnest. Indeed, we are told that he was turned into another man after he had prophesied. And it is certain that God's prophets were never so much His prophets as when they had quite forgotten what people would think of them or say about them, and were only anxious to listen to God's voice in their hearts and to be occupied with Him alone.

In the early days of Israel there was another name for a prophet which helps us to understand the meaning of the word. A prophet was also called a *seer*—that is, a person who could see farther and more clearly than other people; and you must remember that the mind as well as the body has eyes. When a person sees clearly with

the soul, we call such sight 'vision.' Now, there were some so-called seers who were little better than the 'medicine-men' who are found among savage tribes to-day. These people understand more than others of the signs of the weather and the uses of different stones and plants, and they sometimes have a curious power of knowing what is in people's minds, even when the people themselves are scarcely aware of their thoughts. If any of the farmers of Israel had lost a few of their cattle, or wished to know whether it was safe to go on a journey, they were in the habit of consulting a seer, believing that he could see into things hidden from ordinary people. It would seem that God sometimes helped His prophets to guide these inquirers to what they had lost, or to warn them of some hidden danger, so that they might have more influence over these simple men in speaking of higher things. When Saul was seeking his father's asses and came to Samuel for help, the prophet was able to tell him that the asses were found. This helped Saul to place faith in the prediction that he would be king.

But the real reason why this name 'seer' fitted God's prophets was because they had *vision*.

They could see what was wrong in men's lives, and where the nation was at fault, and what God's will really was. The greatest seer that ever lived was our Lord Jesus Christ. His clear eyes saw right into men's hearts, and knew when they meant what they said, and what they really thought, and when they were only pretending or were deceiving themselves. He has done most of all to make men know their true selves, and to understand that God sees all our hidden thoughts, both bad and good. But the prophets, even the humblest and earliest of them, did something to make people know the difference between right and wrong. This was a great part of their work, for there was no Bible in these old days, and people were often confused about things which are as clear to us as daylight because Jesus, the Sun of Righteousness, has shone upon the world.

CHAPTER III

MOSES, THE FIRST PROPHET

NUM. XI, XII. DEUT. XXXIV.

You have heard many wonderful stories about Moses. You know how his mother hid him when he was a tiny baby for fear of the terrible Pharaoh, who had planned the death of all little Hebrew boys; and how, when he was three months old, he floated in his strange little boat among the irises and reeds upon the thick yellow waters of the Nile. And you have heard how the stately Egyptian princess, coming down with her maidens to bathe near that very spot, found the little crying child, and was so filled with pity that she commanded her servants to bring him to the vast and magnificent palace which was her home, and there had him brought up as a son of the royal house. You remember, too, that, though he grew up among men and women who

despised the Israelites and treated them as slaves, yet he learned from his mother—then become his nurse—all the strange and wonderful history of the little nation. And so he came to love his own people with the enduring and tender love that springs from kinship and compassion, till, when he became a man, he was one day seized with sudden anger, and slew an officer who was tormenting an Israelite, and then fled into the desert, there to live the silent, peaceful life of a shepherd for forty long years. And you have learned at least something of the wonderful deliverance of the tribes of Israel from Egypt, and of their wanderings in the desert on the other side of the Red Sea. It does not, then, surprise you to hear of Moses as a leader, or governor, or lawgiver, or judge. But perhaps you are a little surprised to hear of him as being beyond all this a prophet—the very first of the prophets.

It is quite true that speaking was not his chief work, and also that he did not have much to say on the future of his nation. But just because he was a spokesman of God he became such a leader and guide as was never again granted to the nation, showing them constantly and clearly the

will of God for the present moment, so that the future might be according to His will also. He was never more clearly a prophet than when, at God's command, he brought the Israelites to the foot of Sinai. There, because they were not yet ready to understand the love of God, but could only tremble before His goodness and His power, he left them. Then he himself ascended that great steep that he might learn what he must teach the people; not the things only that it was necessary for this little company of wanderers to understand and do, but things that the whole world must learn—the thoughts and deeds which are always right, and those which everywhere and for everyone are wrong. This was even more a prophet's work than picturing what would happen after hundreds of years. Indeed, in disclosing His mind to Moses, God made the veil which hides His Presence so thin that He declared Moses to stand quite apart from all other prophets.

There is a rather sad little story in which we are told this. Once, when the Israelites had been wandering over the vast sandy plains and rocky slopes of the desert for many weary days, Moses'

brother Aaron and his sister Miriam became jealous of him. Miriam may have thought of how she had hidden by the river-side to watch over the little frightened babe in his boat of bulrushes, and felt that she was the one to lead, not to be led. In any case, it was not difficult to find an excuse for quarrelling with him, for it appears that he had lately married a new wife whom they did not like. But this was only a pretended reason, for they were murmuring to one another: ‘Hath the Lord indeed spoken only with Moses? Hath He not also spoken with us?’ Now, to Moses, who was constantly dealing with people who were obstinate and selfish, it was a very bitter thing to find those who should have understood turning upon him with reproaches. He was stunned into silence. The passionate anger which, in an earlier day, had made him strike down the Egyptian overseer was kept under, as a fire is prisoned in a furnace. He held himself so still that this moment earned him the praise of being ‘very meek above all men on the face of the earth.’

As all three stood looking at one another, sadly aware how they stood divided after so many years

of being at one, each felt an inner call to go to what was known as the Tent of Meeting. It was in this place that God made Himself known by special signs, particularly by the appearance of the bright pillar of cloud. When the three found themselves in the tent, then the awful cloud gathered about them like smoke, and the thought of God about His prophets and this one who was His 'friend' became clear to them. This was the message: 'Hear now My words: if there be a prophet among you, I, the Lord, will make Myself known to him in a vision; I will speak with him in a dream. My servant Moses is not so: he is faithful in all Mine house: with him will I speak mouth to mouth, even manifestly, and not in dark speeches.'

These words help us to understand a good deal as to the way in which the prophets received God's messages. Some of them learned what they had to say as they lay asleep or in a trance. Such men did not feel that they had met God, although they had received His thought. In some way it had come to them, and they knew it to be from Him, but how they had received it and known it to be His they could not tell.

Sometimes, too, they only dimly understood their own vision ; it was a mystery. But Moses was not one of these. It was not in visions and dreams that he received truth ; just as when the bright fire of His presence blazed in the midst of the bush and His voice laid His commands upon His servant, so at all times His message came clearly and directly to Moses.

Prophets were often like men standing in a vast darkness, hearing about them the whisperings of an awful mystery. Moses alone, with unclouded sight and hearing, perceived the will of God.

When the cloud which had gathered about them in the Tent of Meeting had melted away, Miriam was seen standing like a figure of snow. It was the terrible pallor of leprosy. This punishment may seem to you very severe—even cruel, but you must remember how very near Miriam had come to God. She herself was a prophetess, and she had allowed an angry sense of her own importance to blot out a truth which had been made clear to her. When the two brothers saw their sister's plight, they were filled with pity. Aaron turned most humbly to Moses, and begged

him to have mercy upon her. ‘Let her not be as one dead, of whom the flesh is half consumed,’ he cried. He did not feel that he could himself speak to God, for the sin he had shared with Miriam lay heavy upon him. Moses cried at once: ‘Heal her, O God, I beseech Thee.’ And God heard the prayer. I think He was waiting for that prayer of pity, and most ready to answer it. Miriam was shut out from the camp seven days like one disgraced, and at the end of that time was welcomed back, quite restored to health. Thus God made plain that Moses was a prophet, different from other prophets, with clearer eyes and wiser heart. And we can understand better why this high place and solitary honour were granted to him, for we see how generous and large-minded and patient he was.

There is another story which shows us again the nobility of Moses, and teaches us to think of him as a prophet when simply doing his ordinary work as leader and judge of the people.

A time came when the Israelites grew tired of the manna, which was their constant food. They remembered the fish they had drawn from the Nile, and the juicy fruits and vegetables of Egypt

— the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlick. Loudly complaining, they cried out: ‘Now our soul is dried away. There is nothing at all; we have naught save this manna to look to.’ They forgot that they were free, and were going to a promised land. Nothing but their food interested them, and they despised the manna which fell silently with the dew, straight from God’s hand. They talked to one another of their hardships, each encouraging the other in complaints, until, all through the camp, they fell a-weeping, as if some dire misfortune had befallen them.

When Moses heard them he was deeply angered. Tired out with his work of guiding them, and cheering them, he felt that their childish complaining was more than he could bear. He poured out his story of weariness and discouragement in prayer to God. He felt like a nurse who is at her wits’ end because she cannot quiet the crying of the little child, for whom she must care by day and night. This was his prayer: ‘Are these people my children? Am I their father, that Thou shouldest say unto me, “Carry them in thy bosom, as a nursing father beareth

the sucking child, unto the land which Thou swarest unto their fathers"? I am not able to bear all this people alone, because it is too heavy for me. And if Thou deal thus with me, kill me, I pray thee, out of hand, if I have found favour in Thy sight, and let me not see my wretchedness.'

God knew the weariness of His servant, and how he staggered beneath the burden. He did not rebuke Moses for his despair, but told him that comrades would be provided to share his responsibility. Seventy of the wisest and ablest men were chosen from among the elders of the people, and were commanded to gather outside the camp, where, apart from the noise and confusion of daily life, stood the sacred Tent of Meeting, the Tabernacle. Then, as they waited, solemnly expectant, they were set apart to help their leader. We are told that God 'took of the spirit that was upon Moses and gave it unto the seventy elders; and it came to pass that when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied and did not cease.' It is not easy for us to understand all that this meant; but it must have been that they were enabled to enter into Moses' under-

standing of the great purposes of God and of His illimitable wisdom and tenderness. It is clear that in the moment of receiving this increased vision—for, as I have told you, vision is the name we give to the power of seeing into the heart of things, which is the special gift of the prophets—they burst into speech and singing, declaring the wonder and glory of God.

Two of those chosen, either because they had not understood that they were to meet with the others, or because they had been too slow in obeying the call, had remained inside the camp. But upon them, too, came the spirit of prophesying; they burst into cries of praise and wonder until their neighbours crowded round them amazed. A young man who heard them hastened to Moses with the news: ‘Eldad and Medad do prophesy in the camp.’ Some of the friends of Moses were filled with displeasure on hearing this; they felt that only those who had been implicitly obedient in gathering to Moses’ side in the solemn assembly had the right to possess this gift. Joshua, who was one day to succeed Moses as leader of the people, was specially angry, and cried out: ‘My lord Moses, forbid them.’

But Moses was wiser and larger of heart. The storm of despairing anger and grief which had shaken him had passed away. He had received a fresh token that God upheld him. He answered quite quietly: 'Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets.' There was no meanness or jealousy in his thought. He was so full of love and fear of the God of his fathers that no desire for his own glory even touched him. He could only feel joy that others—if it were possible, *all* others—should have the same understanding and power as himself. I think Moses was never more Christ-like than at that moment. His saying reminds us of our Lord's promise to His disciples: 'And greater works than these shall ye do.'

Before his death Moses warned the people to put no trust in the diviners and wizards, who pretended to foretell the future by the way liquid rolled in a cup, or by the supposed calling up of spirits from the dead, or by some other fantastic method. He taught them to listen only to God's true spokesmen, who, with no other means than prayer and holiness, could help them and lead them. He bade them look forward to a



After

MOSES.

After the statue by MICHAEL ANGELO in the CHURCH OF
SAN PIETRO in VISCOLI ROME.

time when a greater than himself would come to their succour. The Hebrews were people with a forward look. Their golden age was always before them. First they looked for the Promised Land, and then Moses taught them to look for a Promised One.

I do not think he fully understood how wonderfully this prophecy was to be fulfilled, after the passing of long centuries, by the coming of the very Son of God. But until Christ came from the bosom of the Father, there was never a greater prophet than Moses, who had spoken to God face to face. Although, as we are told, he 'wrought the great terror' in Egypt in the sight of Israel, his soul was filled with worship of the love which he felt to be beating through all the wonder and awfulness of God's power. Once, indeed, he had failed in perfect obedience, and because of it was not allowed to enter into the Promised Land. But, at the last, tranquil and unmurmuring, he mounted alone into the solitary heights of Nebo, there to look upon the fair country spread at his feet, and then to yield back his mighty spirit to the Lord Who gave it, and in Whom he had set his faith.

CHAPTER IV

DEBORAH, THE WOMAN-PROPHET

JUDGES IV, V.

LONG ago, a hundred years or more after Moses died, there might often be seen little companies of Hebrews, as the children of Israel came to be called, passing through the hill-country of Ephraim towards a well-known palm-tree, which grew somewhere in a conspicuous place not far from Bethel. If you had joined yourself to one of these little groups and asked their business, they would probably have told you that they had had a quarrel in their village over some land or cattle, and were going up to the judge to ask who was in the right. And if you had inquired, ‘And who is the judge?’ they would have answered, ‘Deborah, the prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth.’ Strange—was it not?—in that rough old time, the Iron Age of Israel, when every man

needed to be a warrior if he would keep his home safe, that a woman should be exalted to be a judge, and that her decisions should be accepted and respected. But the explanation is not far to seek. She was a prophetess. God gave her special gifts, so that she knew better than others the right from the wrong and the good man from the bad. When people heard her verdicts they were satisfied, because they believed she spoke the will of God.

Perhaps you wonder how it came about that the Hebrews needed judges. It was during that strange, broken time, after the first leaders like Moses and Joshua died, and before kings like Saul and David had begun to rule. The Hebrews had conquered Palestine in something the same fashion as the Danes conquered England. They had not driven out the old inhabitants, many of whom were called Canaanites, and spoke almost the same language as themselves. The newcomers and the old inhabitants lived side by side. Each tribe of Israel had its own work to do in making itself secure, for sometimes the dispossessed Canaanites in turn conquered the Hebrews, and in a few places they remained conquerors.

Each tribe was so busy with its own particular difficulties that soon they were scarcely conscious that they belonged to one nation.

Besides losing their sense of nationality, they were near to losing belief in their one God, the Lord. For, just as the Danes and the English intermarried and influenced each other when not engaged in fighting, so with the Hebrews and the Canaanites. The Canaanites worshipped idols and did wicked things because they thought that these pleased their gods ; and the Hebrews, coming from the bare desert life into a land of vines and fields, had to learn much from the old inhabitants, and in doing so learned some of their religious thoughts and practices also. Only here and there the best and wisest remembered what their fathers had told them of Moses—God's spokesman—and of God's commands. But whenever the oppression of their enemies became very severe, and life was hard and miserable, then the Hebrews always turned back to God again and sought His help. Always, too, at such a time of trouble and terror, God strengthened some chieftain among them to become their deliverer, and the tribesmen, calling to mind once more

that they were, after all, one nation, united beneath one standard. Such a leader, when at length peace was brought about, would often be chosen to be judge to make decisions in disputes.

You will see from this that to be a patriot was very like being a true worshipper, and one who was faithful to God could hardly fail to fight for his nation, since they knew Him to be the God of the whole people, and not of any single tribe.

The Hebrews had never been in such a pitiable plight as in the days of Deborah, and perhaps were passing through an even more miserable time than in the old Egyptian days under Pharaoh. Jabin, the king of the Northern Canaanites, held them in his grasp, and his great general, Sisera, ruled them with a rod of iron. The high-roads were empty ; people slunk along in the by-ways, afraid of being robbed or killed. Weapons could scarcely be found in the houses of the Israelites, and women, children, and cattle were alike unsafe when the brutal soldiers of Sisera were at hand.

In those dark days it was Deborah who cheered the people, taught them to forbear quarrelling

among themselves, and drew them together in unity. The men of Israel, even the bravest of them, had all lost heart. But just as Joan of Arc by her faith in God renewed the courage of the king and generals of France when they despaired of freeing themselves from the yoke of England, so Deborah, by a like trust, inspired a Hebrew warrior to make one desperate attempt to free his nation.

When Deborah called this warrior, Barak, to her side, and told him of God's promise to give Israel victory, and unfolded her plan to him, she found him but half inclined to believe. The tribes were to gather quietly at Kedesh, some taking a stand on Mount Tabor, a lonely hill rising out of the plain, from which they could dash down upon the enemy. But Barak, being without Deborah's faith, was afraid to lead the people by himself, and answered : 'If thou wilt go with me, then I will go : but if thou wilt not go with me, I will not go.' He may have hoped that Deborah's courage would fail her before such a condition ; but if so, he had measured neither her courage nor her wisdom. Immediately she took up the challenge, only warning him that,



D. Anderson.

FORTITUDE.

AFTER THE PICTURE BY BOTTICELLI IN THE
UFFIZI GALLERY, FLORENCE.

since he was content to lean upon a woman's strength, a woman would take from him the chief honour of the victory.

When the tribes were summoned to Barak's standard, some of them came at once. Zebulun and Naphtali responded to a man, and Ephraim and Benjamin followed ; others remained idly at home ; and one great tribe of hardy shepherds hesitated, and finally allowed the great moment in which they could have struck a blow for freedom to pass by.

After the victory was over, Deborah wrote a wonderful poem, in which she covers these waverers and stay-at-homes with scorn : 'By the watercourses of Reuben there were great *resolves* of heart. Why satest thou among the sheep-folds to hear the pipings for the flocks ? At the watercourses of Reuben there were great *searchings* of heart. Gilead abode beyond Jordan : and Dan, why did he remain in ships ? Asher sat still at the haven of the sea and abode by his creeks. Zebulun was a people that jeopardized their lives unto the death, and Naphtali upon the high places of the field.'

But Sisera was too wily a general to be caught

unprepared. He had spies abroad. In all likelihood Heber the Kenite was in Sisera's pay. The Kenites were distinguished from all other dwellers on the land by the fact that they always lived in tents. Heber had separated himself from his clansmen, and had pitched his tent close to Kedesh, so that the Hebrews' preparations took place under his eyes, and he or some other spy informed Sisera that there was danger of a revolt. Immediately the general marshalled his great army, and hurried it into the plain through which the River Kishon runs. There they gathered in thousands, splendidly armed and appointed. Most terrible of all were the iron chariots, nine hundred in number, which could go crashing like a thunder-bolt through the weak, ill-armed foot-soldiers of Israel.

It seemed that Barak and his brave followers were doomed. How could they fight this great army in the plain when there was no chance of a surprise attack? And if they lingered on the hill-top, their forces would melt away, and the remnant would be starved into submission. But Deborah never faltered. She was quite sure that the day of deliverance was at hand. 'Up,'

she cried to Barak, ‘up ; for this is the day in which the Lord hath delivered Sisera into thine hand : is not the Lord gone down before thee ?’ Barak obeyed, though his half-armed followers were like a little herd of goats before a great pack of wolves. He drew down from the hill-top to the plain, and then he began to see in what way victory would be his.

The River Kishon was, ordinarily, quite a little stream, flowing along quietly ; but in the times of heavy rain its swollen waters rushed and roared down its channel, and the ground on either side became like a morass. This was apparently what happened on this eventful day. A thunderstorm broke on hill and plain ; the river rose rapidly ; the battle-field swiftly became a bog ; it was impossible to drive the chariots ; the horses, frenzied by the lightning, became unmanageable ; the whole army was thrown into confusion, and the rout began. The Hebrews had only to pursue and slay to turn the victory into a triumph.

Sisera, seeing that all was lost, descended from his chariot, which made no progress, flog the horses as the driver might. He fled across the plain, and reached the tent of Heber, spent and

breathless. It was the one place where he could hope for protection when the long-harried tribes had found freedom. But Jael was no traitor, like her husband, to Israel's cause. Perhaps she longed to make up for her husband's treachery; perhaps she was offended because Sisera forced his way into the inner tent, the woman's room, where no man but the husband of the family should come. Whatever her reason, when Sisera was sunk in the dead sleep of utter exhaustion, she took the only weapons at hand, and with a hammer drove a tent-peg through the sleeper's brain. So Deborah's prophecy was proved true. Barak missed the crowning triumph of his victory. The general of his oppressors was conquered by a woman's hand.

Such a deed by a woman's hand makes the blood run cold. And we cannot understand how God's prophetess could sing, 'Blessed above women shall Jael be, the wife of Heber the Kenite.' Such high praise we keep for those whose love makes them always patient and pitiful and kind, even to their enemies. But you must remember that even those whom God made His prophets knew only a little of God's will. They

were like people half blind, who can see only a few things clearly, however bright the sunlight. And they were always ready to make these two mistakes: to think that the enemy of the nation was necessarily an enemy of God, and that the only way to conquer an enemy was to kill him.

God teaches only one thing at a time, and the supreme test of any prophetic soul was whether God's message was truly accepted, believed, and obeyed. Deborah is famous among the women of the world because she trusted God when men were lost in doubt. And she shows us that she had not received God's light in vain, ruthless though she was against her nation's enemies. She closes her great battle hymn with these words: 'Let them that *love* God be as the sun when he goeth forth in his might.' She had come to know that we never really worship or rightly serve Him till we love Him. She had learned what the Hebrews took so long to learn—that God asks, first of all, not for sacrifices or for prayers, but for love. When once we have begun to love God, as we know Him to-day, it is not long before we begin to love others, to be pitiful, and to be kind.

CHAPTER V

SAMUEL, THE CHILD-PROPHET

1 SAM. II, III.

You have heard how God spoke to His people by a man, Moses, and by a woman, Deborah, and now you are to hear how God chose a child to be His messenger. The child's name was Samuel.

He had been greatly desired, and came to his mother when she was almost despairing. She had never had a child, and there was nothing in the whole world for which she longed so much ; partly because in Israel it was thought almost a disgrace for a wife to have no children, and partly because she loved children so dearly. It was all the harder for her, because her husband had another wife, who had several children. These were days when people had not come to understand that it was wrong to have more than

one wife. You can imagine poor Hannah—that was the woman's name—sitting at the door of the house, watching the children who belonged to the other wife, and hearing their glad voices while at play, her own arms empty. If ever she wanted to fondle one of the children or care for them, then her rival would jeer at her and tell her to get a child of her own, and to leave other people's children alone. It was very bitter for Hannah.

One year when she felt the emptiness of her life more than ever, she went up with the whole household to one of the gatherings which the Hebrews were accustomed to hold for united worship. Everybody who was able left home and assembled at Shiloh, where the rude temple containing the ark then stood. There the chief priest dwelt and the special sacrifices were offered. It was a very happy time for most people, for holidays were few, and as it was the custom to eat part of the animals which they sacrificed, they had plenty of flesh-meat, a rare luxury for them. Indeed, there was sometimes much more feasting and drinking than worship, and a good many came just for the merry-making. Hannah had

no heart to eat and drink that day. She could scarcely keep the tears back as she thought of all the dreary years before her without a child of her own.

As soon as she could she stole away from the others, that she might weep unrestrainedly. Sitting down before the sacred place, she began to pray. As she prayed, her thoughts took shape, and she vowed that if only God would give her a boy-child she would set him apart 'unto the Lord all the days of his life.' More and more earnestly she pressed her plea. She forgot where she was; the hours passed; though her lips uttered no sound, they moved ceaselessly with her eager prayers.

Suddenly she was rudely startled by a voice, saying: 'How long wilt thou be drunken? Put away thy wine from thee.' It was the voice of Eli, the chief priest, who had been watching; and, seeing her lips move, but hearing no sound, he had jumped to the conclusion that she was one of the people who disgraced this religious festival by drunkenness. Hannah answered very humbly: 'No, my lord; I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit; I have drunk neither wine nor

strong drink, but I poured out my soul before the Lord.' Eli saw that she spoke the truth, and blessed her, and she went away. From that time she had a strange, happy confidence that her prayer would be heard.

And she *was* heard. In due time her little son was born. How she loved him and cherished him, and grudged every minute away from him ! He was doubly precious to her, for she had waited so long for him ; and remembering her vow, she knew that very soon the time would come for her to give up her child to be trained for one of God's priests.

All too quickly the days passed. When he was three or four years old she went up to Shiloh, and came to Eli, and told him how her prayer had been answered. You can see how excited she was, for her words tumble over each other as she pours out her story. 'Oh, my lord, as thy soul liveth, my lord, I am the woman that stood by thee here, praying unto the Lord. For this child I prayed, and the Lord hath given me my petition which I asked of Him : therefore also I have lent him to the Lord. As long as he liveth he is granted to the

Lord.' Then they all worshipped God, and thoughts which had often been in Hannah's mind formed themselves in words, and she began to praise Him in a noble song, which, I think, she often sang again. Something like it has come down to us, and it has become famous, not so much for its own sake as because the Song of Mary, the mother of our Lord, resembles it. Hannah's song taught Mary, the mother of a Child so much more wonderful than Samuel, how to sing.

Then Hannah said good-bye, and ever afterwards she saw her darling son only once a year, when the household went up to the yearly sacrifice. She used then to bring him a little robe. You can imagine how she thought of that day, and with what tears and prayers she stitched at her work of love; and then how quickly the looked-for moment swept past, and she was left for another long year with her memories and her expectations.

And Samuel—how did he fare? Very soon he began to help Eli, who was growing old. It must have been strange to see this little boy trotting behind the old man, eager to be of use, ready to go his errands, and lying

down at night within the holy place that he might help Eli to keep guard. Everyone liked Samuel. When he came in his little linen ephod—a priest's robe just like Eli's—and helped with the sacrifices, the people loved to see him thus busied. And his heart was pure. It opened under God's influence as a flower grows and unfolds its petals in the spring sunshine.

We need not wonder, then, that Samuel was chosen by God to do a special work and to be a prophet when other boys are just at school and busy with thoughts of play. This boy was one among ten thousand boys. He had been specially asked for, and was specially given, and then specially loved and specially dedicated. Besides, his mother was a woman of rare faith and beautiful mind, a poetess by nature. God did not choose at random when He needed a child-prophet.

There were very few prophets of any kind in those days in Israel. It seemed to the people as if God were dumb or had forgotten to send messages to His nation. Of course, there were plenty of priests. They were expected to be the regular teachers of the Hebrews, while the

prophets were only the occasional and special messengers. But the priests were not doing their work. Often it happened so. Prophets again and again had to be sent because the priests had become lazy and selfish and wicked, content to make the sacrifices, undisturbed though the people grew worse and worse. So it was in Eli's day. He was a good man, and did what he could to teach the people aright; but his sons were wicked, and Eli was not strong enough to rebuke them or to displace them.

On one occasion, a prophet came to him and told him that there could only be one end to such conduct. His wicked sons would be slain, and the whole of his family would come to beggary. God would find a really faithful priest to put in his place. But Eli did not believe this was a message from heaven, or, if he listened to it, he forgot it. So the years crept on. It was as if a deep sleep had fallen on the souls of priest and people, and God seemed content to let them slumber.

But it was not so. One night God spoke. On that memorable evening everything was just as ordinarily. When the sun sank, Samuel closed

the doors of the little temple, as he had so often done; he laid out the pallets on which the old man and he slept, and lit the lamp before the ark, and then lay down to rest. As soon as he touched the pillow he slept, just as quickly as happy, busy, tired people always go to sleep.

He had slept but a little while—the lamp had not had time to burn out as it always did before the dawn—when he wakened suddenly, seeming to hear a voice call, ‘Samuel, Samuel!’ In an instant he answered, ‘Here am I,’ and sprang from his bed and hurried to Eli. The old man was nearly blind now, and Samuel was like hand and foot to him, and always ready to do his bidding. But Eli had not called him, and sent him back to rest. He was scarcely asleep before he was roused again by the same voice. Prompt as a soldier at his captain’s command, he rose once more, and came to Eli, saying: ‘Here am I, for thou calledst me.’ But Eli only answered: ‘I called not, my son. Lie down again.’ Perhaps the old man wondered what was making the child he had come to love so restless.

Yet again the voice came to the sleeping boy. He might have been forgiven had he turned

sleepily over, saying to himself, 'It is only the sigh of the wind or a voice in a dream.' But Samuel had learnt to obey, swiftly and without thought of himself, and if ever he had heard his name plainly spoken, it was now. Yet once more he came to Eli, and said: 'Here am I, for thou didst call me.' The old man had been lying pondering. Sleep did not come to him as easily as to the child. Now, when Samuel's eager figure was at his side, his dim suspicions were confirmed. It must be the Lord's voice that the child had heard. He answered: 'Go, lie down again, and it shall be if He call again, answer, "Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth."'

With what a beating heart Samuel lay down again. In a faithful though childish way he worshipped God, but he had not thought of Him coming so very near to anyone, much less to himself, a child. As he lay and waited, he felt an invisible presence close, close at his side, and he heard the voice once more: 'Samuel, Samuel.' 'Speak, for Thy servant heareth'—the answer scarcely breathed from his lips. Then the sad message came to his child-heart. We do not know whether God shaped the

sounds of the air into syllables, or whether it was with the ear of his mind that Samuel heard. Of one thing he was certain: God was speaking to him, speaking of the punishment to fall on the family of Eli, awful punishment for the long-continued sins of his sons. And he had to tell this to Eli. How could he tell the kind and good old man such dreadful tidings? No more sleep for Samuel. It was a new, terrible world for him. Such sinful, shameful deeds, and such bitter sorrows; and God so near!

At last the morning broke. The boy rose and opened the doors of the temple. He went about his work, and all the time the haunting thought was with him, 'How can I tell Eli?' He could not meet the old man with his usual joyful morning greeting.

It was Eli himself who made it easy for him to speak. 'Samuel, my son,' he called. And Samuel, always obedient, answered, 'Here am I.' Then said the old man: 'What is the thing that the Lord hath spoken unto thee? I pray thee hide it not from me: God do so to thee, and more also, if thou hide anything from

me of all the things that He spake unto thee.' So Samuel told him every whit, and hid nothing from him. And Eli said: 'It is the Lord: let Him do what seemeth Him good.' That was the cry of a broken heart. There was no doubt in Eli's mind now that God's vengeance was at hand. The message from this child's lips could be only from Him. Eli was too old and tired to put the wrong right, but he did not rebel; he bowed before God's will, and saw that it was just.

Thus Samuel became a prophet when but a child. He heard the Divine voice, and he was brave to give the bitter message. And ever after Samuel lived the listening life. I think that every morning as he woke he would listen for that strange, clear voice; and as he went to rest he would prepare himself to hear once more the awakening word in the watches of the night; and through the day he would pause and ask himself heedfully: 'Was that the whisper from on high or only the rustling of the leaves?' And God did speak to him again and again. Men came to look on him as the voice of God. His words were honoured more and more. He was

a priest; but he became a judge like Deborah and a prophet like Moses, and he was a wiser judge and a truer priest because God's prophet.

You may wonder that God should have chosen a child to give so harsh a message, and, indeed, the judgment may seem to you too severe to be just. But you must remember that there is no anger like the anger of outraged love, and rightly so. If a mother trusted her little child to you, and you misused the child and spent upon yourself the money given for his good, and after long absence the mother came back to find her little cherished one a thief and a liar, stunted and half-starved, her anger would be terrible to see, and everyone would say she had the right to be angry.

Israel was God's child, and His love is tenderer than that of any mother. He had trusted His people to Eli and to Eli's sons and kinsfolk, and all but Eli had shamefully abused His trust. Was it wonderful that the anger of God's love was so hot? The anger of love is just. And because Eli did not hearken to a man's voice, God sent him a child to tell him the truth, knowing that he would surely understand that no child would tell such sadness had not the message

been given to him. And though Samuel learned so early how sad and bad life may be, it made him fitter to guide the Hebrews and to bring them near to God, seeing that their lives were dark and sinful. And God can never spare any of His messengers pain, not even a child-prophet, if through pain their work for Him will be better done.

CHAPTER VI

SAMUEL, THE AGED PROPHET

1 SAM. X, XI, XII, XV, XVI.

IF you have ever been for a sea-voyage, you may remember passing in the dusk some long, low island, with a lighthouse at each end. By means of the first brightly shining light you could be quite sure where the land began, and by means of the last light you could discern where the land ended; but all between was dim. You could see that land was there, but nothing more.

Samuel's life was a little like this. Only at the beginning and at the close do we know much of him. During the middle years of his life—by far the longest time, from youth to old age—we know only that he judged and guided and taught the people, and came to a position of great influence among them. As his strength began to fail, he appointed his three sons to help

him to govern, but they were quite unlike him. They were not prophets, and they cared much more for their own ease and wealth than for the people's good or their father's honour; they were not as wicked as Eli's sons had been, but they took bribes and gave unfair judgments, and could always be bought if the price offered was high enough. Was it not pitiable that Samuel, too, should somehow have failed to bring up his sons to be his true helpers and faithful servants of God?

When the people met at markets and at the great yearly sacrifices, they often grumbled to one another about the state of affairs, and those who travelled outside their own land brought back accounts of the kings of the neighbouring nations, and how splendid they looked, and how they were always ready to fight against their people's enemies. At last, the elders of the different towns and villages met together, and came to Samuel to put a request before him: 'Behold, thou art old, and thy sons walk not in thy ways: now make us a king to judge us like all the nations.' Samuel was greatly displeased, and at first would give no answer. No doubt he

felt wounded because the people he had served so long wanted a ruler quite different from himself—someone with much more show and glitter and splendour.

But as his custom was, he laid his disappointment before God, and with eyes made wise by prayer, he saw that another reason lay behind this request. The people were really rejecting God ; they wanted to push God farther back in their lives. They were no longer content with the thought that the Lord was their unseen King, whose representative any and every judge or governor was. They wanted a king they could see and applaud and show to other people. The wickedness of Samuel's sons was just an excuse to ask a king, who would, to some extent, take God's place in their eyes.

The Hebrews were slow to learn that God did them honour in singling them out from other tribes and nations to make them a people for Himself. Oftentimes they seemed only anxious to make themselves as like the neighbouring nations as possible. The foolish ones among them felt ashamed when another tribesman asked, 'And who is your king ?' and they had

to answer, ‘Well, we do not have a proper king ; we just have a judge.’ If they had been men of faith, they would have answered: ‘King —our king ? None other than our God is our king. We do not have an earthly king ; we only have judges and prophets to tell us the will of our heavenly King.’

But let us remember that it was good for the Hebrews to have a king when ready for it. The more they felt themselves to be one, and the more the government became regular, the more natural it was that they should desire a sovereign to rule the whole land. Indeed, God Himself had promised that one day they should have a king. Their request was wrong because their motive was wrong, or, at least, partly wrong.

God saw that He could teach them best by letting them have their wish. Therefore Samuel received a command to help them to choose a king, but he was told to tell them how many burdens the new ruler would lay upon them. So he drew a picture of a king’s household, of the young men needed for servants, soldiers, and charioteers ; and of the women required as cooks and waiting-maids and attendants ; and of the

money he would demand to keep up his place, and pay his guards, and maintain his royal grandeur. But the people did not heed the prophet's warning. They were mad to have a king.

A great gathering was summoned at a place called Mizpeh. Here the whole nation met in solemn assembly, and under Samuel's direction they proceeded to choose their king by lot. We do not know exactly how this was done. Possibly the prophet just said 'Yes' or 'No' when the heads of tribes and families came before him one by one; perhaps, by means of pieces of wood of different lengths, of stones of different colours, or tablets marked in different ways, the lot was drawn. Each person had to put his hand into a bag or box, and the one who drew, say, the shortest stick or the darkest stone or the unmarked tablet, was the chosen one.

So the representatives of the tribes drew lots, and the tribe of Benjamin was selected. Next, the elders of the families of this tribe took their turn, and the family of the Matriites was chosen. Then from the members of this family each one in turn drew, and lo, there was still the last lot to be drawn. The man to draw

it was missing. They knew by their registers who it was—Saul, the son of Kish—but he was not to be found.

When they consulted Samuel, he told them that the man was hiding among the baggage. Thither they hurried, and soon found him trying to hide his gigantic form among the harness of the animals and the bales of food, where the baggage was heaped together. He had known beforehand that he would be chosen to be king, because Samuel had privately anointed him. But instead of waiting gravely and solemnly to be singled out by lot, in a fit of self-consciousness he had hidden himself like a nervous child. Had he thought less of himself and more of God in that hour, it had been better for Israel and for him. When he was at last brought before the people, Samuel made the best of an awkward situation by pointing out his great height—his one outstanding excellence—and cried aloud: ‘See ye him whom the Lord hath chosen, that there is none like him among all the people.’ Then the multitude shouted, ‘God save the king!’ and the short and ill-fated line of Hebrew kings began.

Perhaps you think it strange that so solemn and important a matter as the choice of a king should have been determined by what seems to us to be simply *chance*. Truly it was not the best way, and we should be called fools to-day if we decided anything important in this fashion. But these ancient people thought that room was left for God to show His will, just because the result did depend on chance. They expected that His invisible hand, so to speak, guided them, and held back the right sign till the right person came. God in His mercy did thus guide His foolish people when they were in this deep ignorance. Just as a mother will do things to help and encourage a little child, which she would never do or permit to older children who ought to know better, so God was very pitiful with the early Hebrews, who, as yet, understood so little. But He shows His will and way to us in a very different fashion. He bids us pray to Him, and to keep on praying and listening and thinking until, in our own minds, we know what is His choice for us.

No king ever had a better start than Saul. The people, with a very few exceptions, were

loyal to him ; he was the chosen one of God ; the ancient prophet was his friend, ready to help and counsel him. All went well at first. Soon after he had been appointed king and had quietly returned to his own home, the testing-time came. The people of Jabesh-gilead, an outlying town, were besieged by the Ammonites, and they sent a hasty message to Saul, appealing for help. He was ploughing at the time, and immediately slaying two oxen, he hewed them into pieces on the spot, and sent the bloody fragments throughout Israel, calling all the tribes to his standard.

They gathered in huge numbers. Dividing them into three bands, he hurled himself on the besiegers, who were quite unprepared for an attack on the rear, and were scattered to the winds. Saul showed himself great-souled—magnanimous, as we call it—in the hour of victory. A few people had sneered at the idea of his becoming king, and now there was a cry that they should be slain. But Saul said : ‘There shall not a man be put to death this day : for to-day the Lord hath wrought deliverance in Israel.’ All rejoiced together, and none more than the aged Samuel. He led the way down to the nearest place,

reckoned sacred by past memories—Gilgal was its name—and there they made Saul king anew, for they felt that he had proved himself a true king, a defender of his people. And they did not forget to sacrifice peace-offerings to God, for had not their king ascribed the victory to Him?

And now Samuel prepared to step into the background. The old pilot who had steered the ship through so many troubled waters was ready to give place to the young captain. But before Samuel withdrew from the foremost position he had so long held before the people, he wished to clear himself publicly from any suggestion that he had been prophet or judge for his own advantage. Alas! his sons were not like him, and he longed to have it said that he himself had been true.

When the people were gathered before him, he spoke to them sadly and earnestly. These were his noble words: ‘Now, behold the king walketh before you: and I am old and grey-headed; and, behold, my sons are with you, and I have walked before you from my youth unto this day. Here I am: witness against me before the Lord, and before His anointed: whose ox

have I taken? or whose ass have I taken? or whom have I defrauded? whom have I oppressed? or of whose hand have I taken a bribe to blind mine eyes therewith? and I will restore it you.'

The people answered: 'Thou hast not defrauded us nor oppressed us, neither hast thou taken aught from any man's hand.' But this did not satisfy Samuel. He bade them call God to witness, and said: 'The Lord is witness against you, and His anointed is witness this day, that ye have not found aught in my hand.' And the people answered with one voice: 'He is witness.'

When the prophet heard himself thus cleared from every stain and suspicion, he gave his last address to the multitude. He reminded them how God had given Moses and Aaron to lead the nation out of Egypt unto this land, and how He had again and again delivered them from their oppressors, when they had repented of their sins and cried for mercy. And yet when the Lord was their King, they cried for an earthly king. Nevertheless, if they would only fear the Lord, and serve Him and obey Him, all would be well with them; but if not, then the hand of the

Lord would be against them as against their fathers.

Then the people beheld a great wonder. It was wheat harvest; not a cloud in the sky, bright sunshine everywhere. No one could remember rain at this time of year. But swiftly great black clouds covered the heavens; the thunder roared and the lightning flashed, and the rain fell in great sheets upon the earth. The people, dazed by the thunder and soaked with the rain, cried to Samuel to pray for them, for their consciences were ill at ease. They at last confessed they had done wrong in seeking an earthly king to displace their heavenly Lord. Then Samuel comforted the people he loved. He assured them that God would forgive them and train them for His own nation if only they would be true. The last trace of the prophet's own soreness vanished as he heard the people's cries for help, and he said: 'As for me, God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you, but I will instruct you in the good and the right way.' And then, repeating himself, as old men do, he once more cried: 'Only fear the Lord, and serve Him in truth with all your heart,

for consider how great things He hath done for you.'

Thus Samuel handed over the reins of government to the new king, not pettishly nor complainingly, but lovingly, promising his help whenever it was needed. He was never nobler than when he said good-bye to his place of power.

But soon a dark shadow began to creep over the life of Saul; more and more he drifted away from Samuel, and that meant in the end that he drifted away from God. Self-will grew in him, and he was less and less inclined to seek counsel of Samuel, through whom God still spoke. The final break between the aged prophet and the young king came when Saul was fighting against the Amalekites. Ever since the days when the Hebrews defeated them in the wilderness, this desert people had been their bitter foe, and Samuel became convinced that it was God's will that Saul should attack this nation and crush it once and for all. It was to be a holy war, not a war for conquest of land or for plunder. Therefore Samuel commanded that all the herds and flocks, all the people, and their king, should be slain.

The Hebrews were not to return enriched with spoil and dragging prisoners to be their slaves. They were to come back just as empty-handed as when they started, with only this new honour, that they had done utterly and unselfishly the will of their God. Almost all of Saul's wars were for his own sake or for his people's sake, in self-defence or for gain. For once he was to go into battle for God's honour alone. It was like a crusade.

Some people think that God really intended that all these people should be killed, and that every living thing in the country should be massacred, because the nation was exceedingly corrupt. Saul in that case would have been like an executioner when a criminal had been justly condemned to die. But we cannot easily believe this, though, no doubt, the Amalekites were very wicked people. More likely Samuel could not understand that there was any other way than this terrible way of saving his nation from the infection of the evil of the Ammonites.

We must remember that it did not wound Saul's conscience to obey. Such savage slaughter was the custom of the time. It is as if God had

said : 'The only thing Saul can do well is to fight. He loves fighting, and is always fighting. I will teach him to do this one thing, not selfishly for himself, but unselfishly for Me, and for purity and for goodness. He must do it in his own cruel way ; but if he will do it for My sake, he will be a nobler, better man, and this nation of Israel will be more truly My people, so that one day they will come to understand that I hate war and cruelty, and long to save all men.'

Saul gathered his people together gladly enough. Everything prospered in the campaign. The Amalekites were utterly defeated, and all the common people slain. But when he and his warriors saw the well-fed flocks and herds, they could not resist the temptation to preserve them ; and as the conquered king was their chief trophy, they kept him alive also. All the same, they pretended to themselves that they were really carrying out Samuel's demands. Every one of the inferior cattle, the lame, and the diseased, and the undersized, and the half-starved, they killed out of hand, and no feelings of pity made them spare even the women and children. These they slew, while they spared Agag, the pitiless king.

Just before Saul's return, Samuel the aged once more heard God's voice speaking in the darkness of the night, and once more heard a message of condemnation and sadness which he must deliver. Saul had disobeyed, and had turned a holy war into a war for his own glory and gain. He was to be finally rejected. His last chance was gone. All through the sleepless hours Samuel pleaded for the king ; but when the morning broke he knew that God's purpose was final, and he admitted it to be just. If Saul could not obey God when he was at war, the one thing he loved best and did best, then he would not obey Him at all.

The king was returning in triumph, but clearly he had an uneasy conscience, for as soon as he met Samuel he hastened to get in the first word. As if most pleased to meet the prophet, he began : 'Blessed be thou of the Lord : I have performed the commandment of the Lord.' Samuel brushed aside all such insincere courtesies, and plunged straight to the heart of the matter. 'What meaneth then this bleating of the sheep in mine ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear ?' he asked. With a very innocent air, as if he did

not know he was at fault, Saul answered : 'They have brought them from the Amalekites : for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice unto the Lord thy God ; and the rest we have utterly destroyed.'

It would have been difficult to pack more untruths into so few sentences. He laid the blame on the people, as if he, the king, had nothing to do with the matter ; he declared that the fat sheep and oxen had been kept for God's sake ; he spoke of God as 'thy God,' 'Samuel's God,' as if not also his own ; and he protested that he *had* done what he was told.

Samuel suddenly changed the conversation, for the king made as if he would move on. 'Stay,' cried the prophet, 'stay, and I will tell thee what the Lord hath said to me this night.' Then Samuel reminded him how God had taken him from a humble place, and had made him king, and had sent him on this special errand. 'Wherefore then didst thou not obey the voice of the Lord, but didst fly upon the spoil, and didst that which was evil in the sight of the Lord ?'

Saul still held his head high, and would not

at all admit that he was in the wrong, repeating yet once again that he had obeyed, and that it was the people who transgressed, and that they took only the best, that they might sacrifice to God. Samuel's answer was all the more significant from a priest who had so much to do with sacrifices. Priest though he was, as well as prophet, he spoke a word which many of the prophets after him had again and again to tell to the people. 'To obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams,' was his reply, and then he added most solemnly: 'Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, He also hath rejected thee from being king.'

At last Saul was brought to his knees. 'I have sinned,' he cried; 'I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord, because I feared the people, and obeyed their voice. Now therefore, I pray thee, pardon my sin, and turn again with me, that I may worship the Lord.' But Samuel turned away without one word. Saul laid hold of his robe to stop him, and so violently that the cloth tore in his grasp. Then Samuel broke his silence: 'The Lord hath rent the kingdom of Israel from thee this day. The Strength of

Israel will not lie nor change His mind: for He is not a man that He should change His mind.'

Such words should have sounded as the death-knell in Saul's ear. But he did not act like one under sentence of death. He was still thinking how he could stand well with the people, and begged Samuel to hide the breach between them, and to conduct the public sacrifice as if they were still friends. With a touch of contempt Samuel agreed. And then they parted, the old prophet and the young king, to walk different paths. Apparently they did not meet again.

So the last message of the prophet—like his first message, given when a child—was a warning of punishment for sin, that the sands had run out, and the day for repentance was past. Does the God of Samuel seem very different to you from the Father whom the Lord Jesus Christ came to show us? They were not, in reality, but the picture of God in Samuel's mind was far from complete. Only one who loved as much as Jesus loved could teach us how much God loves all men and all nations, even while He punishes them. Samuel, even when a tender child or a pitiful old man, could not himself love enough to under-

stand God's love or to declare it. Besides, Love often has stern, dark tasks to do, that men may learn the only way of blessedness. God could do nothing for Israel until He had taught men to obey Him utterly and that He kept His word. So long as people thought that they could coax and wheedle Him to do what they liked, or that they could put Him off by pretences and excuses, He could not show them that He was Love. He had to begin by showing them that He was Justice and Truth. Samuel served Him faithfully in this hard task.

One duty remained to Samuel before he finished his prophetic work. He had to anoint a successor to Saul. Though he had parted from the king without a tear, he fell into almost a stupor of sadness as he thought of this career which had begun so brightly and was now so fatally darkened. God roused him from his brooding by a command to go down to Bethlehem and anoint there as the future king one of the sons of Jesse, a citizen of that little town.

Samuel dared not go openly for this purpose ; but taking with him a beast for sacrifice, he set forth as if his main purpose was to fulfil his

priestly duties. The elders of the little town met him trembling, for he was held in great awe, and they feared lest his presence should mean rebuke and punishment. 'Comest thou peaceably?' they asked. 'Peaceably,' he said. 'I am come to sacrifice to the Lord.' So they gathered to the sacrifice, and Samuel took care to have a special message sent to ask the presence of Jesse and his sons.

When all were gathered, Samuel thought that he knew God's will at once, for Eliab, the eldest son, was stalwart and good to look upon, and even Samuel was too easily pleased by broad shoulders and a handsome face. Swift came God's warning to the prophet: 'Look not on his outward appearance, or on the height of his stature; because I have rejected him: for the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.' Then Jesse called Abinadab, the next most likely one, and again Samuel would have been well content to pour the horn of oil on his head; but the inward voice instructed him, and he said: 'Neither hath the Lord chosen him.' The father carefully chose another son,



SAMUEL ANOINTING DAVID.

AFTER THE ORIGINAL CARTOON BY ALFRED RETHEL.

but the same answer was made to him. All the seven passed before Samuel, but he knew that none was the Lord's chosen. Then he said to Jesse: 'Are here all thy children?' He answered: 'There remaineth yet the youngest, and he keepeth the sheep.' Samuel asked for him to be fetched at once. The feast which so often accompanied a public sacrifice was delayed till he arrived. He was goodly to look upon, 'ruddy, and withal of a beautiful countenance,' we are told, and his heart was as yet unspoiled. Samuel obeyed the inward commanding voice, and anointed him, the youngest of them all, in the midst of his brothers.

It was a great moment for David, but Samuel did not stay to instruct him. Another than he must guide this youth when he came to the kingdom. Samuel's task was done. Faithful to the end, he did God's will, not his own; and now the tired hands, so busy with holy work from early childhood, could be idle. But he must have died more content when he remembered that bright and eager face which searched his own as he called him to be anointed to the kingly office.

CHAPTER VII

THE PROPHETS OF THE COURT

2 SAM. vii, xii, xxiv.

IT was many years after David had been anointed to be king that he came to the throne. When at last he had fought his way to the kingdom through countless dangers and enemies, he felt very thankful to God for helping him and keeping him safe. He did not feel, like Saul, jealous of God's prophets, but gave them a place at his court, and honoured them and often talked with them. Just as great Highland chieftains were accustomed in ancient days to have bards who lived in or near their castles and held an important position among their retainers, so David was the patron of the prophets Nathan and Gad. This became somewhat of a fashion with the Hebrew kings, and several of them had their attendant prophets.

When the king was living according to God's will, a prophet's life was very happy under such protection ; but if the king did wrong, and the prophet had to rebuke him, you can understand how much courage was required. Hence many of the prophets were tempted to become false prophets. Only those who were very sure of God and listened diligently to His voice were wholly true.

One of the bravest and most honest was Nathan, David's friend. As far as we know, he spoke little about the future ; but he told the king his duty fearlessly, and he was always willing to admit when he himself had made a mistake. He was a kind of court chaplain to David, but a more faithful preacher than many court chaplains have been. God's spirit was just as surely in him, fitting him for this work, as if he had been foretelling quite exactly what would happen five hundred years after.

When King David was firmly established on the throne and began to grow rich, he determined to build a palace for himself. There were no craftsmen among the Hebrews sufficiently skilful to do what he required. But Hiram, King of

Tyre, sent him cedar-trees and carpenters and masons, and soon he was living in a new, beautiful house in his new capital, Jerusalem.

It was not long after this that a great plan entered into his mind—nothing less than to build a glorious temple for God. During all these years since the days of Moses, the ark of God had never had a proper temple provided for it. Sometimes it was kept in a tent, as in the days of the wilderness journey ; sometimes a building was put up for a time, as at Shiloh, when Eli was priest ; but there had never been a proper temple, and this made David feel ashamed to live in a beautiful, luxurious home.

One day he opened his mind to Nathan the prophet, saying : ‘ See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark is only in a tent with curtains.’ Nathan thought this a splendid plan of David’s, and was quite sure that God would approve it, so he answered immediately : ‘ Go, do all that is in thine heart : for God is with thee.’ But the prophets were not infallible. They could only speak the truth they knew, and if they had not listened to God’s teaching on any subject, or had not asked for His guidance, they

were at times no wiser than other men. Even when they listened humbly to all God taught them, they did not always understand perfectly, part of the truth remaining misty and confused.

On this occasion Nathan had spoken too hastily. That very night the word of God came to him, saying : ‘Thus shalt thou say to My servant David, “Thou shalt not build Me an house.”’ It was humbling for Nathan to have to confess that he had been entirely mistaken in encouraging the king in this plan, but he bravely admitted that he had been wrong, and God gave him a message of great encouragement to David. This was a promise that David’s son would succeed him, and would build a house for God’s glory ; and, further, that his son’s sons would rule over the kingdom, and that God’s mercy would not be taken away from them as it had been from Saul.

Most wonderful of all, Nathan was told to say that David’s house and David’s kingdom should be established for ever. This was the first faint glimmering of the promise that God would send a special King, the true Messiah (which just means the Anointed One), who would rule not only

over the Hebrews, but over all nations. David's descendants did rule over a part of the nation for centuries after his death ; but the promise was only proved fully true when Jesus Christ, Who belonged to David's line, became the Saviour of the world and the Master of the millions who are called by His name.

Perhaps you wonder why God refused to allow David to build the temple. David himself explained the reason long afterwards. He had been a man of war all his days, and had shed blood, rightly, as he thought, but often cruelly. God would not have His temple built by such a man, for He was seeking to teach His people that peace is nobler than war, and He was preparing them all through the centuries for Him whom we call the Prince of Peace, Who was to win His victories by love and not by the sword. Besides, David was very far from being wholly good, even though he loved God. He did some shameful as well as some noble deeds. Here is the story of one of his great failures.

A good many years later, when David had been king for a long time, he was walking one evening on the flat roof of his palace, and saw

on a neighbouring housetop a very beautiful woman. You know that almost all the houses in the East are built with flat roofs, so that people can walk and sleep and rest there. He sent to inquire as to this woman, and learned that it was Bathsheba, the wife of one of his warriors, Uriah, who happened to be away with the king's army, fighting against the Ammonites. David had already a good many wives, according to the custom of Eastern kings, and no one, not even the prophets in these days, thought that this was wrong, just as Mohammedans to-day do not think it sinful to have more than one wife. But David knew perfectly well that he had no right to the wife of another man.

A wicked thought crept into his mind. He wrote to Joab, his general, who was then besieging the capital of the Ammonites, to set Uriah in a place of danger that he might be killed. Joab was both crafty and cruel, and he guessed that David had some special reason for his request. Accordingly, he sent some of his soldiers, Uriah among them, as a kind of forlorn hope, to attack the city, where there was almost no chance of escape with their lives. The be-

sieged citizens rushed out under the protection of the archers on the walls, and between the arrows and the spears few of the Hebrews survived. Uriah died among the rest.

Joab knew that to lose his men in this way would seem to David a most stupid mistake. He therefore gave special directions to the messenger whom he sent to bear the news. Should the king become angry on hearing of so great a loss, another message was to be delivered as if a kind of afterthought. It was this: 'Thy servant, Uriah the Hittite, is dead also.'

Everything turned out as Joab had expected. When the messenger told how the army fared, and of the heavy loss sustained, David, with all his old fighting wisdom awake, cried out in a rage: 'Wherefore went ye so near the wall? Knew ye not that they would shoot from the wall? Why drew ye nigh unto the wall?' The messenger tried to calm the king by explaining how unexpected the disaster had been, and added: 'And thy servant, Uriah the Hittite, is dead also.'

Immediately the king's tone changed. He could with difficulty conceal his pleasure that his

treacherous purpose had been achieved. He dismissed the messenger to Joab with these hypocritical words: ‘Let not this thing displease thee, for the sword devoureth now one and now the other: make thy battle more strong against the city and overthrow it.’ David felt that his plan had turned out very well. Everything had been managed without scandal. Uriah was out of the way, and nobody could blame the king for it. When Bathsheba had spent the appointed days of mourning, David took her into his palace to be his wife. He had his heart’s desire, and there seemed none to rebuke him.

But God was not blind; He could not thus be duped. Nathan the prophet learned what David had done, either because the dark secret leaked out or because God revealed it to him. He knew he must rebuke the king. But how to approach his royal friend and master? No more painful task had ever come to Nathan. And how was he to reach David’s conscience? It was months since the sin had been committed. How could the king be brought to confess his fault after all these weeks of silence? At last the prophet found a plan. God strengthened and cleared his

mind so that he saw a way by which he might approach and, perchance, soften David.

The king was sitting one day, ill at ease, when Nathan came to him under the plea of telling him a story of injustice. This was the story :

‘There were two men in one city ; the one rich, and the other poor. The rich man had exceeding many flocks and herds : but the poor man had nothing, save one little ewe lamb, which he had bought and nourished up : and it grew up together with him and with his children ; it did eat of his own food and drank of his own cup, and lay in his bosom, and was unto him as a daughter. And there came a traveller unto the rich man, and he spared to take of his own flock and of his own herd to dress for the wayfaring man that was come unto him, but took the poor man’s lamb and dressed it for the man that was come to him.’

Nathan could get no further. David’s anger blazed forth as if a furnace-door had been suddenly opened. He cried : ‘As the Lord liveth, the man that hath done this thing shall surely die ; and he shall restore the lamb sevenfold, because he did this thing and because he had no pity.’

These were the words Nathan had hoped to hear. David's anger was roused against another. There was hope that it could be turned against himself. With one brief sentence the prophet stabbed down to the deep, festering sore in David's soul, and said: 'Thou art the man.'

David had no word to say. All the pretences and excuses by which he had covered up his sin were pierced through at one stroke. He saw himself as he was. And as the prophet went on to remind him how rich he was, and how many wives he already had, and how many pleasures were open to him, and that, in spite of all, he had robbed Uriah, a soldier fighting bravely for him, of both wife and life, David's pride and hardness all melted away. 'I have sinned against the Lord,' he said. Few words with which to confess a sin, but each one was like a tear of blood. David was humbled to the earth.

As soon as the king was penitent, Nathan had a message of mercy to bring to him. He told him that the Lord had put away his sin; he would not die; he was pardoned. But punishment must fall upon him, and his evil example would taint the life and shadow the lot of his

descendants. The child whom Bathsheba bore to him would die, and some of his own sons would sin as he had sinned, and do it not secretly, but publicly.

Perhaps you are inclined to say, ‘Then David was not pardoned, for he was punished.’ But you must understand that when God forgives us so that we can come to Him again without fear of His holy anger, this does not mean that we are to escape all the consequences of our sin. If a boy steals a sovereign from his father and spends it all in foolish ways, and then comes and confesses that he has been a thief, it may well be that the father, seeing how truly sorry his son is, will forgive him, and say: ‘We are friends again. I will never mention your wrong-doing. I will trust you as before, and leave my desk unlocked just as I used to do. But you can have no pocket-money until you pay this money back.’ Through all the weeks which follow, the boy does not feel that his father is frowning on him every day or is distrusting him, but all the same he has to go without his weekly allowance till he has paid the debt. He is forgiven; he is not sent to prison as a thief, but he has to pay a certain penalty.

In just the same fashion, God, Who is kinder and juster than the best earthly father, and Who sent His Son to die for our sins, is most ready to forgive us when we confess our sins. And yet we may have to suffer much for our foolishness both in our bodies and in our homes.

David quite understood how God can forgive even while He goes on to punish. The heaviest penalty of all had been to know through all these miserable weeks that God's face was turned away from him. Now, when he knew that God had forgiven him and welcomed him back, he could be brave to bear the worst consequences of his wrong-doing, for his heart was at peace.

Once more in his life David had to hear a stern message from a prophet, and it happened in this way.

When he was an old man, and had made his kingdom wide and safe, both he and his people felt that Israel had become a great nation. No enemy was left whom they needed to fear. Instead of being a weak people, a few scattered tribes, always in dread of some foe, the whole land had become one, and all the neighbouring nations knew and feared them. They had

stepped, in the brief space of forty years, into a lofty position. It was a little like what happened in Germany last century, when Prussia rose in fifty years to become the equal of any nation in Europe, and formed the great German Empire.

Clearly the danger for David and his nation was pride. They were tempted to think that they themselves had secured this great success, and that God had had little to do with it. As they looked to the future, they were apt to trust much more to themselves than to God's help.

David showed that he had fallen into this snare by giving orders to have the people numbered. This seems to us a very innocent thing. A census of our nation is taken every ten years, and no one thinks that we thereby show our distrust in God. But all depends on the motive of our action—that is, the inward purpose of it. It is one thing for a man to count up the money he has made in a year, so that he may thank God for it, and know how much he has to spend and to give away; it is quite a different thing for him to reckon up his gains, only that he may gloat over them, and think how clever he is, and plan to get richer and richer just for his own pleasure.

Now, David wanted to find out how many fighting men he had, that he might glory in them and dream dreams of further conquest. This was disloyal to God. It was very like despising God.

No sooner was the work completed than David's heart smote him. He did not wait to be rebuked, but there and then confessed his fault, saying: 'I have sinned greatly in that I have done; but now, O Lord, I beseech Thee, put away the iniquity of Thy servant, for I have done very foolishly.'

It was in the darkness of the night that David's conscience had reproved him, and in the morning, Gad, who was a fellow-prophet of Nathan's, came with the message of punishment. A choice of three evils was offered to David—seven years of famine, or to flee three months before his enemies, or three days' pestilence in the land. 'Now advise and see,' said Gad, 'and consider what answer I shall return to Him Who sent me.'

David was sorely troubled by these words, but his answer shows that he truly trusted in God, even though so reckless at times. He said to

Gad: 'I am in a great strait: let us fall now into the hand of the Lord: for His mercies are great: and let me not fall into the hand of man.' So the pestilence raged for three days, and seventy thousand men died.

These were days of deepest misery for David, and as the evening of the third day approached he was walking restlessly hither and thither, saddened by the dreadful news from all parts of his kingdom, and fearing that Jerusalem, which was as yet untouched, would be stricken next. People in those days believed that a death-angel went forth from God when plague struck a land or a city. And as David watched, he thought he could behold the angel of the plague hovering over a certain threshing-floor, ready to stretch forth his hand against the city.

In an agony of repentance and pity David cried to God: 'Lo, I have sinned and I have done perversely: but these sheep, what have they done? Let thine hand be against me and against my father's house.' There spoke the true, noble David, the man whose heart was right with God. I think that God had really let David see the appearance of an angel, so that he might be

wakened to deeper penitence. In that hour the onward spread of the pestilence stayed, just as sometimes in later days the plague or cholera ceased as swiftly as it had come.

Gad came to David in that moment of intense relief, and told him what to do. He was to buy the threshing-floor over which the angel had hovered, and build an altar there and offer sacrifices to God. Soon the king with all his retinue was seen taking his way to the humble farm-place. Quickly it was purchased, and the altar built and sacrifices offered.

These sacrifices meant two things. They expressed what David felt about his sin and about his possessions. He knew that he could not himself wipe out his sin, and that he really deserved death. The sacrifices were offered instead of his life, and were a sign that he humbled himself before God and yet trusted in His mercy. Also the very fact that he offered up to God the best of his cattle meant that he acknowledged God's ownership of everything he possessed.

Thus God helped the king to find peace once more, and we see how wide-minded the best prophets could be. Often they had to speak

against sacrifices and declare that they were useless if they were offered without thought, as if God would be content if only the smell of roast flesh rose regularly from off His altar. But sacrifices had a real use when offered by penitent and grateful hearts. Therefore Gad the prophet encouraged the king to do what Samuel had condemned when he said to Saul: 'To obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.' Both prophets were right, for Saul's sacrifice was meant to screen his disobedience, David's to seal his penitence.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PROPHETS OF THE NEW KINGDOM

1 KINGS XI, XII, XIII, XIV.

WAS there ever a sadder failure than that of Solomon? He was heir to a great kingdom. He lavished much treasure on a temple to God's honour. He began wisely by choosing wisdom as God's best gift. The beginning of his reign was like the beautiful dawn of a glorious summer day, but its end was like an evening, heavy with thunder, the sky covered with thick banks of cloud. He was not content with the glory God gave him, but imitated the kings of the heathen nations, marrying many wives, wasting his money on great buildings, and compelling his people to toil for him without payment. Many of his wives were heathen princesses, and to please them he took part in the worship of their gods. I suppose he thought to be liberal-minded, and

that, without forsaking his own God, he could worship other deities. One God was not enough for him. It pleased his vanity to have many gods as he had many wives.

In Jerusalem, within sight of God's temple, he built lofty altars in honour of Ashtoreth, the goddess of the Zidonians, and Chemosh, the abomination of Moab, and Molech, the abomination of the children of Ammon. Well might these gods be called abominable, for their worship was both filthy and cruel. And all the time the murmur of the people, ground down by heavy taxes and driven like slaves to compulsory labour on fortresses and palaces, rose up to heaven, though unheeded by the king. It was impossible that this should go on.

Now, King Solomon had a servant, Jeroboam by name, who was both pushing and crafty. The son of a widow, he had to make his own way in the world. His industry and energy soon attracted the king's notice, and before long he was made superintendent of the great works for the defence of Jerusalem. He was really a kind of taskmaster, and was set over the Ephraimites, whom the king brought from the north to labour

in the capital. These were fellow-tribesmen of his, and he was clever enough, while pleasing the king, to make them his friends. Often he dreamed of delivering them from the king's tyranny, and sometimes, in his secret thoughts, his ambition rose as high as the throne itself.

One day he went out from Jerusalem, and as he walked and brooded in a solitary place, he saw before him Ahijah. This was a prophet from Shiloh, who, clad in a new garment, had come forth to seek a private interview with the young man. Without a word, he seized his new robe and tore it into twelve pieces, and thrust ten of them into the hands of the astonished Jeroboam, saying: 'Take thee ten pieces, for thus saith the Lord God of Israel, "Behold, I will rend the kingdom out of the hand of Solomon, and will give ten tribes to thee."'

The prophet went on to explain that it was God's will that one tribe, Judah, should be left to David's descendants, 'that David My servant may have a light alway before Me in Jerusalem'; but because of Solomon's faithlessness, all the other tribes would be formed into another kingdom—not, however, until his son came to the

throne. Only eleven tribes are mentioned, for by this time the tribe of Simeon had dwindled out of sight, and its few remaining families were attached to Judah. There was pity in the prophet's stern words. The kingdom, as kingdoms go, was new, scarcely a hundred years old, aptly figured by the new garment, and already, as if it were old and worn out, it was to be torn across.

The prophet ended by warning Jeroboam to be God's man, to give himself to be God's tool. He showed him that his secret ambitions, never breathed to another soul, were well known to the Most High. These were the words God put in Ahijah's mouth: 'I will take thee, and thou shalt reign according to all that thy soul desireth, and shalt be king over Israel. And it shall be, if thou wilt hearken unto all that I command thee, and wilt walk in My ways and do that is right in My sight, to keep My statutes and My commandment, as David My servant did, that I will be with thee, and will build thee a sure house as I built for David, and will give Israel unto thee.'

Jeroboam had no word to say. It was too

wonderful. The ten pieces of cloth were warm in his grasp. God's promise was his. He was to reap the fruit of all the years of struggle, and hard work, and self-repression. He was to be king. King! the word he had only dared to speak under his breath.

This message was God's kindness to Jeroboam. God had read his heart, and knew him to be the right instrument wherewith to punish Solomon's house. But there was the risk that he would do this work selfishly for his own gain, and not solemnly as God's tool and the people's saviour. Therefore the prophet was sent early to tell him of the great prize God would put into his hand, so that he might be moved to consecrate his energy and his ambition to God's service.

Jeroboam listened to the promise, but not to the warning. He was not content to wait God's time. While Solomon yet lived, he set about raising a rebellion against the king, was discovered, and had to flee for his life to Egypt. It was a bad beginning. It showed only too plainly that he had more confidence in himself than in God.

But his exile was not for long. Solomon died

soon after, and his foolish son Rehoboam spurned the people when they came to ask for the lightening of the heavy yoke his father had laid upon them. With scornful, boastful words he told them that he would add to their yoke. More taxes, more hard labour, more hardships—it was intolerable. An angry shout went up from the assembled tribes: ‘What portion have we in David? To your tents, O Israel! Now see to thine own house, David!’ Even the revered name of David was now hateful to them. At one stroke Rehoboam lost more than half his kingdom. Only Judah remained faithful to him. Ahijah’s prophecy had come true.

It did not take the other tribes of Israel long to decide upon a king for the new kingdom. There was clearly only one man for the throne. Jeroboam had hurried out of Egypt as soon as he knew of Solomon’s death. It was he who had led the petitioners before Rehoboam. His name was on every man’s lips. He was the people’s hero, and, without an opposing voice, was acclaimed their king.

Thus God had kept His promise. The poor widow’s son was wearing the crown. But the

prophet's words had been in vain. More than ever Jeroboam felt that he was the maker of his own fortunes, and must depend upon his own strength and craft to keep his throne. Very soon he showed that he trusted in his own cunning rather than in God.

The ten tribes had been accustomed to go up to Jerusalem at least once a year to join in the sacrifices in the new temple. Jeroboam feared that if they kept up this custom they would still think of Jerusalem as the real capital, and would in due time return to their allegiance to David's grandson. What was to be done? Ahijah, God's prophet, was within reach, and could have been consulted. God, Who had given him the throne, could surely keep the throne for him. But Jeroboam did not think that God had had much to do with his becoming king, and his inventive mind had hit upon a plan.

In Egypt he had been accustomed to see the people worshipping their god under the appearance of a bull. Why should he not make a golden image of a young bull and teach the people that this represented their god, and that they should gather to sacrifice before it? It was

true that Aaron had done this, and had been hotly rebuked by Moses, but was Moses always right? He would follow Aaron's plan. Soon two calves of gold shone before the eyes of the people, one in Dan, to the north, and one in Bethel, towards the south of the new kingdom. And he said to the people: 'It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt!'

With his usual energy, he set to work to secure men to act as priests. The Levites still held faithful to the temple at Jerusalem, but he was not baffled. He made priests of men of other tribes, and he sacrificed and burnt incense himself so as to make the new worship fashionable.

He was only too successful. The people soon learned to like the change. It was pleasant to be able to see something to which to offer sacrifices. A yearly feast-day was appointed at exactly the same time as the feast-day in Jerusalem. The tribes flocked to Bethel just as once they had gone up to the temple. Jeroboam's clever plan had succeeded, and it seemed as if Moses had taught in vain.

But God was not left without witnesses. There were prophets in the land to do His bidding. On one of the feast-days, when the king was just about to burn incense on the altar with great state, a threatening voice from out the crowd was heard, crying: 'O Altar, altar, thus saith the Lord. . . .' And as the astonished people listened, they were told that in days to come this altar would be defiled, and for a sign it would even now be rent asunder, and its ashes poured upon the ground. The speaker was a prophet from Judah, who, under an overmastering impulse from God, had come to proclaim the Divine anger against this idolatrous worship.

The king was standing on the altar steps above the people, and could quickly scan the crowd. The prophet was at once detected. Burning with anger, the king stretched out his hand to point to the intruder, and cried to his guards: 'Lay hold on him!' But before anyone could obey, the king's anger died away in sudden fear. *He could not draw back his arm.* Try as he might, it remained stiff and motionless, like the withered branch of a tree. And in that moment the altar broke across, and the ashes fell

to the earth. The silence of a great awe fell upon the crowd.

Jeroboam, too, was panic-stricken. His strong right arm, with which he had fought his way to the throne, could serve him no longer. Did he in that moment bethink himself that his pride in his own cunning and energy was but folly? We do not know; but he was for the moment humbled, and cried for mercy, beseeching the prophet to pray that the use of his hand might be restored to him. The prayer was promptly made and answered. God was very patient with the king. There were days left in which he could consecrate that strong right hand to faithful service. There was work for it to do if it would: altars to be torn down, golden calves to be destroyed. Jeroboam was given yet another chance.

There was no thought now of continuing the sacrifice, and the king turned to the prophet and begged him to come home with him and refresh himself, and take a reward for his kindness. The man was dusty from his journeying, and looked haggard and weary, but with firm voice he answered: 'If thou wilt give me half thine

house I will not go in with thee, neither will I eat bread nor drink water in this place: for so was it charged me by the word of the Lord, saying, "Thou shalt eat no bread, neither drink water, neither return by the way thou camest." With these words he turned, and with dragging steps passed from the crowd and took the different path home.

Now, there was an old prophet living in Bethel. It was long since he had heard any prophet speak for God, and long, long since he himself had heard the inner voice bidding him proclaim a message from on high. He had never protested against the new way of worshiping, but he did not join in the observance of the feast. As he sat at home, one of his sons came and told him the great news that a real prophet had been heard that day, a man of God without doubt, who had been able both to lay a curse upon the king and to lift it from him.

A great longing seized the old man to see and hear this messenger of God. His heart was like thirsty ground, eager for the rain. Quickly he asked which way the stranger had gone, ordered his ass to be saddled, and hurried after him. He

had not a long journey to take, for soon he found him whom he sought sitting, spent and faint, under an oak-tree. Eagerly the old man begged him to return and eat with him. Firmly as before, though with fainter voice, the prophet answered that by God's command he must neither eat nor drink until he reached home.

A strong temptation seized the old man. He saw that nothing could prevail over this brother prophet save another voice from heaven. Swiftly he made up his mind, and said that an angel had commanded him to bring the traveller back. But he lied to him. Nevertheless, the wearied prophet now allowed himself to be persuaded, and soon was seated at the table of the old man with his sons. How eagerly they questioned him concerning his errand, and why he had become convinced that he must come, and in what way God had revealed His will.

But as the old man listened, there came upon him, like a sudden gust of wind, that which he had so often longed to know again—the prophetic power. There and then he felt he must speak the message given to him. Ah, how their faces fell and his own voice broke and shook as he

declared his tidings ! Their guest was to die, to die because of disobedience—disobedience to the mouth of the Lord forbidding him to eat or drink while on his journey.

The prediction came fatally true. They forced the stranger to take his journey on the old man's ass. Perhaps a faint hope was in their heart that if he hastened home he might escape disaster. It was not to be. Soon the news came to Bethel that a strange sight had been seen. By the road lay a dead man, and on one side of the body stood an ass, saddled and bridled, and on the other side a lion.

The old prophet knew only too well what this meant. If the ass was unafraid of the lion, and the lion did not tear the ass, it must be because the wild beast was God's executioner, and was restrained from doing more than the one fell deed. He hastened to the spot. At least he could give decent burial to the brother prophet he had lured to death. Carefully they brought back the body and laid him in the old man's own grave, and mourned for him as one of their own kin, lamenting, 'Alas, my brother !' And the aged prophet begged that when death came

to him he might be laid by the stranger's side.

You may feel that this punishment was too dreadful to have been God's will, but when God calls a man to do a special service for Him, and speaks clearly in his ear, then to disobey is to be untrue to the Almighty in a particularly defiant way. And if God could not have depended upon His prophets, then the whole nation would soon have sunk for ever into filthy thoughts and idolatrous ways, and God could not have shown us His heart of love, for there would have been no prepared people to whom to send His Son. And the prophet was forbidden to eat or drink on his journey or in Bethel for good reasons—to show King Jeroboam that the whole land was accounted defiled by his idolatry, and to convince the people that the message from God was as solemn and had as little of earth in it as if brought by an angel from heaven.

Jeroboam, though cowed for the moment, did not change. It was harder to get people to be priests, so that he was driven to take anyone who offered, however bad his character. But he still persisted. The altar was repaired, and the calves

of gold still shone in the sunshine, and the idolatrous worship went on as before.

But Jeroboam's conscience was ill at ease. Every shadow of trouble made him afraid, and when his dearly-loved son fell ill he dreaded lest this should be God's punishment; he could not rest. The prophet Ahijah, who had promised him the kingdom many years before, still lived. The king begged his wife to disguise herself and to take a simple present in her hand, as if she were a farmer's wife, and go and ask the prophet if their son would live. The old prophet was blind with age, and they may have thought it easy to deceive him; but God prepared him for her visit, and when he heard the sound of her feet as she came in at the door, he cried to her: 'Come in, thou wife of Jeroboam! Why feignest thou thyself to be another? for I am sent to thee with heavy tidings.'

Then he reminded her how God had exalted her husband to be king, and yet he had done evil above all that were before him, making molten images, and 'casting God behind his back.' Sadly the old man spoke the words of doom over the house of Jeroboam. His son, who was sick,

would die, and soon the last descendant of Jeroboam would be slain, and the throne given to another. The stricken mother turned away without a word, and as she reached her own threshold her son died.

But to the end Jeroboam continued in his old evil way. He could not bring himself to confess to the people that he had been wrong, and to humble himself before God. He died as he had lived, and was branded for ever with this dark title, 'Jeroboam, who made Israel to sin.'

It is often the cleverest and most vigorous men who think that they can do without God, and even try to make religion just a means of furthering their policy and their plans. If they will not learn to be humble before the great Maker of us all, and will not seek the child-heart, then they go to their doom, however many prophets God may send, and however many warnings they may hear.

CHAPTER IX

ELIJAH, THE HERO-PROPHET

1 KINGS xvii, xviii.

KING AHAB never forgot the day when he first met the prophet Elijah, who was to be a thorn in his side all the years of his life. Suddenly, as if he had dropped from the clouds, there stood before him a strange-looking man, whose dress and bearing alike demanded attention. A robe, roughly woven of camel's hair, was bound by leathern thongs about his waist. Gaunt and strong of limb, with fearless brow and piercing eye, he faced the king. No courtier this, nor humble petitioner, what did his presence mean? With no greeting and few words he spoke his message and presented his credentials: 'As the Lord, the God of Israel, liveth, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word.' Was

the man mad? No prophet known to Ahab spoke words stern and unflattering as these. While the king, dazed by this sudden challenge, hesitated for the moment, the speaker was gone. He had vanished as suddenly as he had appeared.

Soon the king knew that none other than a true prophet had met him, for a drought longer than the oldest man could remember set in. When the summer was over and the ever-welcome autumn rains were due, anxiously men scanned the heavens for a single cloud. But dawn after dawn revealed the blue sky, uncurtained by a single wreath of mist, and nightly the sun sank to rest in the same unclouded air. The last tinge of green faded from the meadows, the watercourses fell to trickling streamlets, and finally vanished away. Only a spring or two among the hills, though much diminished, failed not. The whole land was hard and scorched as if baked in an oven.

Ahab had not been told why the drought had come, but he could easily guess its meaning. After the years of bloodshed and unrest which followed the downfall of Jeroboam's house,

Omri, the father of Ahab, had won the throne and made his position secure. He handed on to his son a settled and powerful kingdom, and this son had set himself to make it still stronger and safer. By his marriage with Jezebel, the princess of the Zidonians, he had made an alliance with this neighbouring nation, and no pains were spared to make the friendship lasting. A temple of Baal, the god of Zidon, was built in the new capital, Samaria; priests of Baal were appointed. This heathen worship went on side by side with the worship of Israel's God. It was bad enough for the Lord to be worshipped under the appearance of a golden bull, far worse when another god was placed alongside of the God of Moses and Samuel and David.

Ahab saw no harm in the new worship, or, if he did, soon stifled his scruples. It suited his politics to be complaisant to the new religion. He would not have dreamed of worshipping the god of a hostile nation, but it seemed to him only natural that he should be friendly to the god of a friendly nation. He did not understand that there could be no room in Israel for any but Israel's God. Just when the Lord was about to

teach that He was God not only of Israel, but of the whole world, Ahab was degrading Him to be no more than the deity of a tribe, like a dozen other gods. Worse, Jezebel had already slain all the prophets who had mourned or attacked the incoming of the new religion. It was a great crisis. Israel was near to losing what Moses had taught. A hero was needed, one who would do and dare rather than teach. God sent Elijah, and armed him with faith to do miracles the like of which had not been seen since Moses.

When Elijah had given his warning, curt and clear, he turned back into the land of Gilead, whence he had come. There, far from cities and the court, he halted at God's command in the bare glen where the brook Cherith flowed. Already the drought had begun. It was a desert place, where there were neither berries to be gathered nor roots to be dug for food, just the stream trickling in its stony bed. He had been led here that his trustfulness might be strengthened by daily waiting on God for food. Morning after morning, and evening after evening, ravens left bread and meat upon the rock near which he sat.

Some people think that this word translated ‘ravens’ means ‘robbers,’ and that it was by brigands of the district he was kept in life. But in that moment of utmost peril for Israel’s faith, when only a man of mighty faith could save the cause of true religion, God did not think it beneath Him to work a miracle and to use the birds of the air so that His chosen servant might grow stronger and stronger in confidence in an unseen hand. Elijah had to depend every day upon God’s mindfulness alone. When he awoke in the morning to find a scanty meal to his hand, there was no promise that the same would be brought by hungry birds in the evening. He had to trust for every morsel he ate. And every day the little stream fell lower and lower, until one morning it had quite vanished. Only then the prophet received his marching orders.

The new journey was a fresh trial of trust. He was to go to a widow, the poorest of the poor, who lived in a village in the kingdom of Zidon, beyond the borders of Israel. It was God’s way of proving that He was God of every land, and that His hands of might could provide for His servant anywhere.

As Elijah came to the end of his journey he was famished and thirsty, for the earth was as dry and barren in Zidon as in Israel. Seeing the widow woman gathering twigs for a fire, he begged her for a drink of water. As she was going to fetch it, he asked for food too. Then she turned on him with despairing eyes, and answered with a solemn oath: 'I have not a cake, but a handful of meal in the barrel and a little oil in the cruse; and behold, I am gathering two sticks, that I may go in and dress it for me and my son, that we may eat it and die.' Her last hope was gone.

If the prophet had not known beforehand how God would provide for him, in that moment he knew, and answered cheeringly: 'Fear not; go and do as thou hast said: but make me thereof a little cake first, and bring it forth unto me, and afterward make for thee and for thy son. For thus saith the Lord, the God of Israel, The barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that the Lord sendeth rain upon the earth.'

Something in his calm, strong voice made her believe him. It was hard to have to use most of

her little store for this stranger, while her hollow-eyed child watched her with hungry looks, but she did. How anxiously she looked in both barrel and cruse when the prophet had been fed, and with what joy she discovered that the promise had been kept! There *was* plenty for her and for her son. After such a wonder the prophet was a welcomed guest. Then began the lesson of faith. The barrel was never heaped high with meal, the cruse never brimmed over with oil, but there was always enough and a little over. So from morning to evening, and from evening to morning, both prophet and widow had to live by trust; but while the prophet trusted in God, the widow trusted in the prophet.

Then a dark shadow fell upon the little home. The child fell sick, and his sickness was very sore. The chill of death was upon him, and his mother held him to her bosom to keep him warm, as if to defy death to take him away. All in vain: he ceased to breathe. When the prophet came in, the poor mother, with the dead body still in her arms, turned fiercely upon him, saying: 'What have I to do with thee, thou

man of God? Thou art come unto me to bring my sin to remembrance and to slay my son.' She thought that God's attention had been directed to her because His prophet lived under her roof, and that her sin, long overlooked, had been remembered and was thus punished.

'Give me thy son,' said the prophet, and took the lifeless little form from her arms. Then he climbed the rough stairs to his little chamber under the roof, and laid his burden upon his own bed. His faith had grown strong by the little brook and in the humble home, and he dared to believe that God would heal the poor woman's sorrow. He prayed and stretched himself upon the child three times, as if he would give his own body's warmth to the cold limbs, and then he cried unto the Lord: 'O Lord my God, I pray Thee, let the child's soul come into him again.'

It was a great deal to ask. When our beloved die, we dare not ask God to give back life. We only pray to have grace to bow to His will. But that was the day of great need, when great deeds must be done if faith was to be found on the earth. God honoured His servant's trustfulness. The child revived, and Elijah brought him back



ELIJAH RESTORING THE WIDOW'S SON.

AFTER THE WATER-COLOUR BY FORD MADOX BROWN IN
THE SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM.



to his mother, still sitting in a stupor of grief, heeding nothing. Only when the prophet said, 'See, thy son liveth,' did she awake to her joy, and said: 'Now I know thou art a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in thy mouth is truth.' This was the first testimony borne to Elijah, for he was ever a lonely man. It must have been sweet to him, and, I think, all the sweeter because from the lips of a foreigner. His long, slow training in fuller faith was now complete, and God called him forth to the great battle for the truth.

The drought had lasted more than two years when Elijah set out to seek the king with the tidings that rain was at hand. On his way he met with Obadiah, one of the highest officers of the court, and yet always faithful to the Lord, never having joined in the worship of Baal. Samaria had suffered heavily in the long water famine, and Obadiah had been sent forth by the king in a last search for grass wherewith to feed the few remaining horses and mules of the king's stud. When Obadiah saw Elijah he fell on his face, and said: 'Is it thou, my lord Elijah?' He had a great reverence for God's prophet,

which had deepened into fear, seeing that this last prophecy had been so terribly fulfilled.

Elijah, brief of speech as ever, answered : ' It is I. Go, tell thy lord, Behold, Elijah ! ' There was no joy in Obadiah when he heard the prophet's command. He knew how eagerly the king had sought the prophet everywhere, and feared that Elijah might disappear before Ahab could be brought to the spot. He had striven earnestly to serve both his God and his king. It had often been difficult, but never more difficult than now. It seemed as if he must make one or the other angry.

We see how agitated he is as he pours out his entreaties to Elijah. ' Thou sayest, " Go, tell thy lord, Behold, Elijah ! " And it shall come to pass as soon as I am gone from thee that the Spirit of the Lord shall carry thee whither I know not ; and so, when I come and tell Ahab, and he cannot find thee, he shall slay me. But I thy servant fear the Lord from my youth. Was it not told my lord what I did when Jezebel slew the prophets of the Lord, how I hid an hundred of the Lord's prophets by fifty in a cave and fed them with bread and water ? And now

thou sayest, “ Go, tell thy lord, Behold, Elijah !” and he shall slay me.’

As we see Obadiah kneeling—almost grovelling—before Elijah, we mark how great the contrast may be between two good men. Obadiah would never have dared to rebuke anyone, and he could bear to live in an idolatrous court ; yet he kept his own soul clean and ran risks so as to do good by stealth. Elijah, on the other hand, was born to rebuke men, and would not have endured for a day the slights the king’s chamberlain had to bear ; but it was not possible for him to do the kind deeds Obadiah had done. Yet, though they were so different, Elijah had a real respect for this true man, and answered most solemnly : ‘ As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself unto the king to-day.’ So Obadiah went to find his master.

During these years of heavy suffering Ahab must often have planned how he would punish and torture Elijah when he had caught him, but when the two stood face to face he could only say, in words like the snarl of a frightened dog : ‘ Is it thou, thou troubler of Israel ?’ Elijah struck home at once with his reply : ‘ I have not

troubled Israel, but thou and thy father's house, in that ye have forsaken the commandments of the Lord, and thou hast followed the Baalim.' Then he demanded that he should be brought face to face with the people of Israel and with the idolatrous prophets of Baal, four hundred and fifty in number, who lived on the queen's bounty. There was something so bold and unlooked for in this request that Ahab agreed. Speedily the prophets of Baal and a great multitude from all over the land had assembled to meet Elijah.

The meeting-place was Mount Carmel, a green-covered mountain running into the sea and overlooking part of the kingdom of Zidon, as well as much of the land of Israel. It had been claimed at times by the people of Tyre, who belonged to the Zidonians, but there was a ruined altar to the Lord upon it. It was thus a most suitable battle-ground when the two religions were to meet in a death struggle.

Here Elijah, single-handed, faced the people, and demanded that they should choose between their ancient Lord and the new god Baal. His voice rang out over the dense crowd as he cried : ' How long halt ye between two opinions ? If

the Lord be God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.' The people answered not a word. They did not want to choose. Like their king, they were content to have more than one god worshipped in their land. Then the prophet proposed the trial by fire. God must have put this plan into his heart, otherwise he had not dared to suggest it. Two bullocks were to be taken, one for the prophets of Baal and one for Elijah. Both were to prepare a sacrifice and call to their god to consume it by fire from heaven. The god who answered was to be approved the true God. The people answered with a shout, 'It is well spoken,' and the trial began.

It was a strange sight. On one side, Elijah, alone, apart, without a single acknowledged follower; on the other, the priests of Baal, with many to back them, for they were the queen's favourites: and the great multitude as onlookers and judges.

This is the story of what happened, as the old chronicler tells it:

'The prophets of Baal took the bullock which was given them, and they prepared it for sacrifice, and called on the name of Baal from morning

even unto noon, saying : “ O Baal, hear us.” And they leaped about the altar which was made. And it came to pass at noon that Elijah mocked them, and said, “ Cry aloud : for he is a god ; either he is musing, or he is gone aside, or he is on a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth and must be awaked.” And they cried aloud, and cut themselves after their manner with knives and lances, till the blood gushed out upon them. And it was so, when midday was past, that they prophesied until the time of the evening offering ; but there was neither voice, nor any to answer, nor any that regarded.

‘ And Elijah said unto all the people, “ Come near unto me,” and all the people came near unto him. And he repaired the altar of the Lord that was thrown down. And Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, unto whom the word of the Lord came, saying, Israel shall be thy name. And with the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord ; and he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two measures of seed. And he put the wood in order, and cut the bullock in pieces and laid it on

the wood. And he said, “Fill four barrels with water” (no doubt from an unfailing spring on the hillside) “and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood.” And he said, “Do it the second time.” And they did it the second time. And he said, “Do it the third time.” And they did it the third time. And the water ran round about the altar; and he filled the trench also with water.

‘And it came to pass at the time of the evening offering that Elijah the prophet came near, and said: “O Lord, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that Thou art God in Israel, and that I am Thy servant, and that I have done all these things at Thy word. Hear me, O Lord, hear me, that this people may know that Thou, Lord, art God, and that Thou hast turned their heart back again.” Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it they fell on their faces, and they said, “The Lord He is God; the Lord He is God.” And Elijah said, “Take the prophets of Baal; let not one

of them escape." And they took them, and Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon, and slew them there.'

Thus Elijah won the greatest victory of his life. In the sight of land and sea, before the eyes of two kingdoms, he was proved a true man and his Lord the true God. It was not the words of Elijah, but the faith which fired him to great deeds, that made him a prophet worthy to be set alongside of Moses. Well did he prove that day the truth of his watchword, 'The Lord before whom I stand.' God was to him a most mighty King, strong to conquer every enemy, before Whose unseen throne he, a humble servant, stood, ready to be sent on any message. Alone or with a multitude, what mattered it? He was doing the bidding of the living God and the Lord of hosts, Whom a whole army of celestial soldiers obeyed.

The work of that great day was not yet complete. It was now late afternoon, and the time of the evening offering was well past, but the sky was still clear. Not a cloud was to be seen. Nevertheless, the prophet bade the king eat and drink, for the rain was at hand. Already

in his own ears he heard the sound of abundance of rain, the pattering of the heavy drops, the gurgling of the springs long dry, the rushing of the watercourses full to the brim. He climbed to the summit of the headland, and bowed himself till his head was between his knees, and gave himself to intense prayer for the rain he had promised. He himself would not interrupt his supplications by rising to look whether the clouds were coming over the sea, whence the showers were wont to come before the drought began.

But he sent his servant to look. He had a servant now. Perhaps one of the people had just volunteered to be his servant, having seen his great victory over Baal. The answer came back, 'There is nothing.' 'Go seven times,' was the prophet's reply. Six fruitless visits the servant paid to the verge of the land to scan the horizon seawards. For the last time he went, and behold, far out across the waves, there was a little darkening of the sky, one blot upon the blue. Was this what his master wanted? At any rate, he should be told. 'Behold, there ariseth a cloud out of the sea as small as a man's hand.' That was enough for Elijah. His

prayers were over. It was time for action. 'Go up,' he said; 'say unto Ahab, "Yoke and get thee down, that the rain stop thee not."

Scarcely was the chariot ready before the sky was black with clouds, driven before the hurricane, hastening to do their long-neglected work. The great drops began to fall. The king had started none too soon. Though the horses, lashed by the driver and frightened by the gale, tore down the road to Jezreel, the rain was before them and upon them and about them.

Swiftly the chariot flew, dashing through the people who crowded the highway on their homeward journey. But the first news of the victory was to be carried by the victor himself. Elijah, still under the mighty impulse by which he had triumphed for God, girt his garment close about him, and, taking his place before the hurrying chariot, kept it to the city gate and entered the city first. Did the king ever forget that terrific ride, the falling darkness, the wild clouds overhead, and the waters about his horses' feet, and every moment before his eyes that gaunt, undaunted form, speeding untiringly to the city gate?

CHAPTER X

ELIJAH, THE DEFENDER OF THE OPPRESSED

1 KINGS XIX, XXI. 2 KINGS I.

WHEN Elijah threw himself down to sleep on the night of the rain-storm, I think he fully expected that almost immediately the worship of Baal would be abolished throughout Israel. The people who had gathered to Carmel had come over to his side, and the king, if not stricken with dread, had at least not interfered to save the idolatrous priests.

But the prophet had forgotten Queen Jezebel. She was furious, like a tigress reft of her cubs, when she heard of the slaughter of the priests of her god. Instantly she sent a message to her enemy, saying : 'So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by to-morrow about this time.' It may seem strange to you that she did not kill him

without warning, for Jezebel thought murder no obstacle in the pursuit of her ends. Perhaps she feared this man, whose power with his God was so great, or she may have dreaded the fury of the people should she lay hands on him. Probably she hoped to drive him from the country by her threat.

If this was her plan, she succeeded. Elijah, exhausted in body and spirit, could not face this new crisis, and at once took his way to the south. Travelling night and day, he put the whole breadth of the kingdom of Judah between the furious queen and himself, and leaving his servant at Beersheba, a town on the verge of the desert, he struck into its pathless wastes. At last, utterly wearied, he cast himself under the scanty shade of a solitary juniper-tree, and breathed out a despairing prayer : ‘ It is enough : now, O Lord, take away my life ; for I am not better than my fathers.’ Then he fell asleep, hoping in his desolation that it would be the sleep of death.

Perhaps you can scarcely believe this to be the same man who single-handed had defied the priests of Baal, and had raced before the king’s chariot into Jezreel. There he lay, spent, pros-

trate, utterly wearied, without strength and without hope. How came it that he had so utterly lost heart? It was partly the reaction which we always feel after great exertion and excitement. But, besides that, I think Elijah had been depending too much upon himself. He really had thought himself something better than his fathers. He had had a fierce joy in standing out as God's solitary champion, and had been tempted to think that none but he could win the victory for the truth. When his great stroke failed of immediate result, he felt that all was lost. Then, too, he had been careless of his bodily needs both in his excitement and his reverse. He had had first no time and then no heart to eat or drink, and now he was paying for his neglect. Strong son of the wild though he was, he had overstrained his strength. He had new lessons to learn before he could finish the work God had given him to do.

As he lay in his heavy sleep an angel stood by his side; but even a voice from heaven could not waken him. Only when he was touched did he stir and hear the angel's command: 'Arise and eat.' Behold, a cake was baking on hot stones

beside him, and a cruse of water was within reach. Only half awake, he ate and drank a little, and, lying down, slept once more.

The angel of the Lord came a second time and touched him, saying, ‘Arise and eat : because the journey is too great for thee.’ Then he understood whither God was calling him. He shook off sleep, and ate and drank heartily, and struck across the desert to Mount Sinai. He was going to the far-distant range of peaks which was still called the Mount of God, because there Moses had spoken with the Lord face to face. Here he, too, was to meet with God in a new and wonderful way.

When he had reached the sacred spot, so full of solemn memories, he found a cave in which to lodge. Sitting there in the dim light, he was aware of a questioning voice, ‘What doest thou here, Elijah?’ Then he burst forth in the words which he had been saying over and over again to himself like a chant of despair : ‘I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of Hosts ; for the children of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant, thrown down Thine altars, and slain Thy prophets with the sword : and I, even I only, am left ; and

they seek my life to take it away.' Elijah would not yet confess that he had made any mistake. He speaks bitterly, as in self-defence, in his despair throwing the blame of his failure upon God.

Then he was told to go out of the cave and stand under the open sky before the Lord. How lonely it was! Far as the eye could reach stretched mountain-ridge and rock and sand, without one moving creature. And how still! No voice of wild beast or call of bird or friendly human sound, only the awful Divine Presence.

Suddenly there came a tempest of wind, rending the mountains and breaking the rocks in pieces; but Elijah found no message for him in the wind. After the wind an earthquake, but while the whole mountain-side swayed and shook Elijah heard not the mysterious voice for which he listened. After the earthquake a fire, but as the rocks melted and the sand boiled in the consuming flame he still could hear no word, strain his ear as he might. But after the fire came a still small voice. It was a mere whisper, but it was more wonderful and more terrible than all else, for God was in it. Elijah, knowing himself

in the presence of God, hid his face in his mantle and stood in the entrance of the cave to listen.

When the voice spoke, it was to repeat the same question, 'What doest thou here, Elijah?' And Elijah answered as he had done before: 'I have been very jealous for the Lord God of Hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant, thrown down Thine altars, and slain Thy prophets with the sword: and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life to take it away.' He had been repeating the words to himself so long that he could use no others.

But he did not speak with despairing defiance as before. He had just learned a new and wonderful thought about God. Though stormy wind and earthquake and fire were all God's instruments, yet He was most of all in the still small voice. I think Elijah learnt that lesson, and understood that God is really working when there is no visible token of His Presence, no great calamity or arresting punishment. I wonder if, when God's Presence was revealed in that gentle whisper, he began to think that he had been mistaken in slaying the priests of Baal.

I wonder if it glimmered upon him that he had not loved and pitied enough.

God had no rebuke for His servant, for it was Elijah's judgment, and not his loyalty, that was at fault. All that came to him was for his encouragement. He was told that the royal houses both of Syria and of Israel would be changed by the appointment of new kings ; he was shown where he would find a new servant, Elisha, who would be a comrade also ; and, finally, he was assured that there were in Israel seven thousand—a round number to signify a considerable multitude—faithful worshippers of God who had never bowed the knee to Baal, and whose mouths had never kissed him.

It was no longer ebb-tide in the soul of the prophet-reformer. God had delivered Elijah from the depths of despair, just as our Lord saved Peter from his desperate remorse. Each had to receive a new lesson, the first the love of gentleness, and the second the gentleness of love, and each was encouraged after the same fashion in being bidden to fresh service for the Master he adored.

When Elijah had returned from Sinai and

had called Elisha to be his comrade, he took refuge in the wilderness of Damascus, on the north of the kingdom of Israel, where he was safe from Jezebel's anger, and yet at hand to do God's bidding. It was not long before he was called to condemn Ahab for fresh wickedness. This time it was not idolatry, but tyranny, which drew down God's anger.

There was a yeoman named Naboth, who had a little vineyard close to the king's palace. It had belonged to his forefathers for many generations, and he loved it the more for their sakes, and delighted to work in it and make it fruitful. The king cast covetous eyes on it, and wished to include it in his palace lands for a kitchen-garden. So he sent for Naboth, and offered either to buy it or to give him a better vineyard in exchange. But Naboth answered: 'The Lord forbid it me, that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee.' He did not want money or better lands. He could not think of living anywhere else than where he had grown up as a boy, and seen his father and grandfather at work.

But Ahab had set his heart upon this plot of ground, and when it was denied him he came

home and threw himself on his couch and refused to eat, for all the world like a sulky child. Jezebel soon discovered the reason of the king's dejection. Her haughty soul could not bear the idea that the king should be thwarted, and she had no scruples as to the means to be employed to satisfy his wish. She laughed away his ill-temper, and said : 'Dost thou now govern the kingdom of Israel ? Arise, and eat bread and be merry. I will give thee the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.'

Her plan was very simple. She sent a letter, sealed with the king's signet, to the elders of Jezreel, and told them to trump up a charge against Naboth of treason to God and the king, and to have him condemned and executed forthwith. The elders, who formed a kind of council of Jezreel, did not dare to disobey the royal command. They secured two worthless men to witness against Naboth in order to keep the letter of the law, which forbade the condemnation of anyone unless two witnesses agreed. These men declared that they had heard Naboth curse both God and the king. He was not allowed to defend himself, but was hurried out

of the city and stoned to death, the dreadful punishment for blasphemy. There his poor body lay, a prey to the pariah dogs who prowled about outside the gates.

Our blood boils when we read of this treacherous murder, the more shameful that the Divine name was brought into it. To think that Naboth should suffer death on a false charge of disloyalty to God, and that Jezebel, who renounced God daily in her worship of Baal, should suggest the plan ! Though such deeds were done regularly by Eastern monarchs, and, indeed, are done in our own day, Israel had been free from them hitherto ; but now there was no protesting voice. Jezebel gaily bade her husband take possession of the coveted land.

But the righteous God had beheld the deed, and Elijah was sent to meet the king upon the ill-gotten land. Hardly had Ahab entered the vineyard and begun to admire the rich soil and the luxuriant vines than he came face to face with the grim figure of the prophet. In an instant Ahab's delight in his new toy vanished, and he cried out in guilty terror: 'Hast thou found me, O mine enemy ?' Elijah answered

relentlessly: 'I have found thee: because thou has sold thyself to do that which is evil in the sight of the Lord.' Then followed words of burning condemnation. Because of this deed every man child of Ahab's family should be slain, and Jezebel herself should meet with a frightful end. The king shrank trembling before the curse passed upon himself: 'In the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick thy blood, even thine.' There was no need for Elijah to hasten his retreat that day. The words of God's anger pronouncing so terrible a curse were a sure defence.

Here God shows Himself as caring every whit as much for justice between men as for the loyalty of men to His worship. Ahab had escaped the worst condemnation when he permitted the worship of Baal. There was no escape for him when he permitted the worst injustice in order to satisfy a selfish whim.

Thus Elijah wrote two great truths concerning the God of their fathers before the eyes of the nation. First, that He was the only God of Israel, and the worship due to Him must not be given to some god made by the hands of men;

and second, that He cared supremely for righteousness, and would not overlook oppression of any kind.

There is one other incident in Elijah's life of which you must hear. King Ahab was killed in battle, and the prophecy concerning his queen and himself came true. His son Ahaziah came to the throne, and when he had reigned for some time he met with a terrible accident. He fell through the lattice of an upper window and lay between life and death. He had more than followed the evil example of his mother, and now, not content with the worship of Baal, he sent in his sickness to Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron among the Philistines, to inquire if he could recover.

When his messengers had gone but a little way Elijah met with them, and said: 'Is it because there is no God in Israel that ye go to inquire of Baal-zebub, god of Ekron? Now, therefore, thus saith the Lord, "Thou shalt not come down from the bed whence thou art gone up, but shalt surely die." ' The messengers, amazed that a stranger should know their errand, hurried back to the king.

Surprised at their speedy return, he asked the reason, and they told him their story, but they did not know the name of the prophet. Ahaziah, however, had too often heard from his father of Elijah not to suspect that it was he who had once more appeared. Eagerly he asked: 'What manner of man was he who came up to meet you?' When he heard that the stranger wore a garment of hair, girt with a leathern belt, any uncertainty vanished, and he made up his mind to capture the prophet. A captain and a troop of fifty were sent to bring Elijah to the palace.

The officer had not far to seek, for Elijah was seated on the top of a hill as though to invite attention. 'O man of God,' cried the captain, 'the king hath said, "Come down."' There was no reverence in the words, no sign that the soldiers believed at all in God or in His prophet. They evidently imagined they had been sent on an easy task. It scarcely needed fifty armed men to capture one old man. Elijah felt that the hour had come to show forth the terrible dignity of the God whom king and soldiers alike despised. 'If I be a man of God,' he answered, 'let fire come down and consume thee and thy

fifty.' And there came down fire from heaven, and they were consumed.

As the first troop did not return, the king, in a fever of anxiety, sent a fresh captain with another company of fifty soldiers to bring Elijah. This officer was even more imperative than the first, and cried : 'O man of God, thus hath the king said, "Come down quickly." ' There was the same contempt in this man's tone both for the prophet and for God, Whose spokesman he was. The answer was as terrible as before. Elijah would not have this title 'man of God' used lightly. 'If I am a man of God,' he answered once more, 'let fire consume thee and thy fifty.'

Rumour now reached the palace of what had happened, but the king, obstinate even in his sickness, ordered yet a third troop to go to Elijah. This captain was no reckless, unbelieving soldier. He recognized that the prophet was the messenger of the great God of Israel, and he humbled himself. Bowing on his knees, he implored mercy for himself and his soldiers, and Elijah, in obedience to an angel of the Lord, came down from his place and was led to the

palace. But if the king had hoped to win better tidings from him, he was disappointed. Elijah could only repeat that he could never recover, and then make a hasty departure.

This is such a grim story that many people think that it never really happened, or, at least, did not happen quite like this. They believe that the accounts of it have become confused. And yet we must remember that all life is in God's hands, and that He may only be approached with the deepest reverence. In that dark day in Israel, when His name was flouted and despised, and He was treated as though only one of many gods, and as weak as any, it may have been His will to allow this terrible reminder of His power.

But if this was a right way to convince men of the overruling might of God in that rude and savage day, we know from our Lord Himself that this is not the spirit in which we should act now that the fulness of light has come. When Jesus was passing through Samaria with His disciples, and at nightfall asked for shelter and was denied it because of the old unfriendliness between the Jews and the Samaritans, James and John were full of anger at the inhospitable

villagers, and, remembering Elijah, they cried : 'Lord, wilt Thou that we call fire from heaven and consume them ?' But Jesus turned and rebuked them. They did not know of what spirit they were. The Prince of Peace had come to win people by love, and not by fire.

CHAPTER XI

ELISHA, THE IMITATOR OF ELIJAH

2 KINGS II, IV.

ELIJAH is the first prophet who was immediately succeeded by a follower of his own training. Joshua succeeded Moses as leader of the people, but not as prophet. After Samuel there was a break without any prophet, so that Saul sought to call him back from the dead to consult him. Neither Nathan nor Gad nor Ahijah were sure that their work would be immediately carried on. Only Elijah, who had been the loneliest of them all, handed on the prophetic task with his mantle, so that there was not a moment's break in the prophetic ministry. This was God's doing, for the dangers to religion were too great for the country to be left with no true guide. Only because of Elisha's affection and fidelity and faith was it possible for him at once to succeed Elijah. It happened in this way.

There came a day when the knowledge was given, not only to the two whom it chiefly concerned, but also to all the wandering companies of prophets, that Elijah's work was done. He set out on his last journey, and felt himself led on step by step from Gilgal, high on the central range of hills, down through Bethel and Jericho, across the low valley of the Jordan, to the land of Gilead, whence he had first come when Ahab had been startled by his sudden appearance. It was from his home country, where God had called him to be a prophet, that he was to be taken home into the nearer presence of God.

Elijah knew that he was not to die as other men die; and as he had lived so much in solitude, he wished to pass alone to be with God. But Elisha longed to abide with his master through every precious moment still left to them. When they reached Gilgal, Elijah said: 'Tarry here, I pray thee; for the Lord hath sent me to Bethel.' Stern and rugged though he was, he could not endure to bid farewell to his friend. He wished to part from him as if they were soon to meet again. There is none so tender as the austere man. But Elisha knew all that Elijah could not

say, and would not be left behind. 'As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee,' was his answer. So they went down to Bethel.

Bethel was one of those centres where those who made prophecy a profession lived together as comrades. No sooner had Elijah and Elisha appeared than they came crowding round Elisha, saying: 'Knowest thou that the Lord will take thy master from thy head to-day?' All agog with excitement, they blurted out what these two sad men could not bear to mention. We cannot but feel how badly God would have been served by men like these. Elisha silenced them with a curt reply: 'Yea, I know it: hold ye your peace.'

Once more Elijah sought to separate himself from his comrade. He said: 'Elisha, tarry here, I pray thee: for the Lord hath sent me to Jericho.' But Elisha would not be persuaded, and gave the same answer as before—he could not use stronger language: 'As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee.' At Jericho the guild of prophets was just as intrusive as at Bethel. Like men who touch a

hidden wound with a rough hand, they said : 'Knowest thou that the Lord will take away thy master from thy head to-day ?' Elisha did not waste words of reproof or explanation on these dull minds, and answered shortly as before : 'Yea, I know it : hold ye your peace.'

Then Elijah made one last attempt to go on alone, but he knew Elisha's mind before his answer came : 'As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee.' So they two went down to the River Jordan. The band of prophets did not dare to follow them closely, but they felt mystery and wonder in the air, and stood afar off, watching the two lonely figures on the river-bank.

Elijah had done but few miracles. It was himself, his rock-like character, his unwavering faith, which had been the best proof of God to the people. But now, as he was hastening on to meet God face to face, no earthly obstacle was to hinder him. He wrapped his mantle together until it was like a rod, and smote the waters of the river. Back they rolled, and Elijah and Elisha passed over, as once the Hebrews, too, had passed, dry-shod, to enter the Promised Land.

And now, away from prying eyes, with the moment of parting very near, Elijah broke silence to the man who loved him and clung to him. He said: 'Ask what I shall do for thee before I be taken from thee.' Elisha was ready with his request. He dared now to put into words his great longing: 'I pray thee let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me.' He did not mean that Elijah was to make him twice the man his master had been. He was only asking for the double portion which the first-born in a Hebrew family received. Regarding himself as Elijah's spiritual child, he asked that he might have twice the gift of vision or power which any member of the prophetic guilds might receive. He was filled with the desire to carry on Elijah's work, and felt how weak and unfitted he was for the task.

Elijah answered: 'Thou hast asked a hard thing; nevertheless, if thou see me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so.' The one gift which a prophet could not make was his own power as a seer. It could only be received by the man of courage and faith and character fit to receive it.

This was why Elijah made the test. If in the awful moment of departure, when the unseen became visible, Elisha had eyes to see, and courage to look, and steadfastness to endure, then the thing he craved should be his.

And now that at last they had been able to speak to one another of the parting, they went on talking eagerly. There was so much to say, and the long march had been so silent. But even while they spoke, suddenly there appeared a dread sight in the lonely upland. Chariots of fire with horses of fire! A whirlwind swept Elijah from his servant's side, and while the fire blazed and the wind swirled, Elisha stood unfearing. He had no thoughts for himself. This was the hour he had so often foreseen—when he should be left alone without the strong master on whom he had always leaned, and whom he loved so much. He cried out: 'My father, my father. The chariots of Israel and the horsemen thereof,' and rent his garment from hem to hem in his bitter sorrow. In a flash all was over, but Elisha had beheld the home-going, and there lay beside him on the ground the mantle of Elijah as token that the promise would be fulfilled.

In this fashion Elijah left the earth. Do you think it was an easy way, and that to escape death was a great privilege? Ah, the death-hour is easier than was that awful moment when the fire of heaven played round the earthly form of Elijah. But it was a fitting and a glorious way for one who had been as the fire and the hurricane for the truth.

Elijah had done a great work for God. He had saved the faith of Israel; he had prevented the blotting out of the knowledge of God from the earth; and now, by the manner of his passing, he planted the seed of faith that God was not only the God of the dead, but of the living. Across the centuries he touched hands with Moses. It was fitting that, when two were chosen from among the prophets to speak with our transfigured Lord of His coming victory over death, that the founder of Israel's religion and the saviour of Israel's faith should be chosen above all others.

The mantle which had fallen from Elijah as he was taken up to heaven was a precious possession for Elisha. It was the one bequest of him he had so long delighted to call master. As he took

his way to the Jordan, he carried it with him. Standing on the brink of the rushing waters, he felt that he must once for all put to the test the power he had received to carry on Elijah's work. With the mantle he smote the surface of the river as he had seen Elijah do, and cried: 'Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?' It was a cry of doubt almost as much as of confidence. He could scarcely believe that God would answer him for himself, but he had hope that, for Elijah's sake, his appeal would be heard. God had compassion on that humble, shaken man, and the miracle he asked was done. The waters divided as before, and Elisha crossed dry-shod. From that moment his trust in God was fixed. He knew that he was accepted to carry on Elijah's work.

Something of this confidence had passed into his face and manner, for as the band of prophets, who had been watching from a distance, met him, they said, 'The spirit of Elijah doth rest on Elisha,' and they bowed before him. But their new-born reverence made them neither wiser nor less intrusive than before. They immediately proposed to send fifty of their number to search

for Elijah, in case the spirit of the Lord had cast him on some mountain or into some valley. Elisha, fresh from his tremendous experience and knowing full well that he would never see his master on earth again, answered, ‘Ye shall not send.’ But he had not yet gained Elijah’s authority over men, and the prophets urged him to grant permission until he was ashamed of their foolishness, and, to get rid of them, said, ‘Send.’ He waited at Jericho three days until the jaded messengers returned, shamefaced, after a thorough search. Then he rebuked them, saying: ‘Did I not say unto you, “Go not”?’

Just because he was less awe-inspiring than Elijah, the men of Jericho did not let him depart without begging favours which I think they would never have dared to ask of his master. The spring which watered the city and its gardens was brackish, and spoiled their land. They begged the prophet to give them good water. He asked for a new cruse with salt in it—salt which purifies and cleanses, and was therefore a symbol of restoring and renewing power. Casting the salt into the spring, he did his first deed of power in the name of God, and healed the waters.

Elijah's first public act declared a drought ; Elisha's first public act gave abundance of good water. Elijah had only stern tasks to do ; Elisha's deeds were often of gentleness and compassion. But Elisha was altogether a smaller nature than Elijah. He imitated Elijah in many ways, and when he imitated his master's sternness we see how truly he had only received a double portion of his spirit.

Elijah had called down fire from heaven upon unbelieving officers and their servants, that men might learn to reverence God. Elisha also, at the beginning of his ministry, was mocked and answered fiercely ; but it was not soldiers nor, indeed, grown men who aroused his wrath.

As he was passing from Jericho to Mount Carmel, the hill sacred to the memory of Elijah's great deed, some lads out of the city of Bethel mocked him, crying : 'Go up, thou bald head.' They were showing an ugly irreverence, both to age and—far more important—to a man set apart to interpret God's will ; and, moreover, they had evidently gathered deliberately for the purpose of jeering at him. Yet after all they were no more than children.

Elisha turned on them and cursed them. Before they reached home two she-bears, often fiercer than the males, came upon them out of the wood, and wounded forty-two of them. We are not told that by this sign God showed His approval of the curse spoken by Elisha, nor do we know that the boys were killed. The writer simply puts the three facts side by side—the boys jeered, Elisha cursed them, and the boys suffered. Nevertheless, we feel that a sore punishment was what Elisha desired for them, and it is plain that his spirit was widely different from that of Christ. Even the best and greatest of the prophets were imperfect men.

But it would be very unfair to God's prophet to think that such harsh thoughts were common to him. A beautiful story is told of his imitating Elijah in another way, the way of kindness. It happened later in his life, and in this fashion.

There was a wealthy lady, who had an estate in Shunem which her husband farmed. She noticed that Elisha passed her door frequently, and on one occasion she pressed him to dine in her house, and it soon became his regular custom

whenever he took that road to rest for a while under her roof and eat bread there.

The lady then began to plan how she might do him greater kindness ; she saw that he was a holy man, and she desired to do him honour. She therefore proposed to her husband to build a little room which should be kept specially for the prophet. She had thought a good deal about her plan before speaking, for we can almost hear her as she runs over in her mind the things that would be necessary—a bed, a table, a stool, and a lamp. It would never have occurred to her husband to do so much for anyone, but he was perfectly willing to fall in with his wife's proposal. In due time the room was quite ready, and on Elisha's next journey he found this friendly haven where he could be alone and rest and think.

He immediately desired to show his gratitude for all this kindness, and asked the lady, through his servant, what he could do for her. Would she care to go to court or have her husband made an officer in the king's army ? She answered : ' I dwell among my own people.' She had no ambition of this kind, and was

content to live as she had always done with the country-folk around her. The prophet was at a loss to know what else to suggest; but his servant, who was quick and observant, had read her dearest wish. She was childless, and longed to have a son of her own. When Elisha called her and told her that next year she would embrace a son, she could not believe the good news, and said: 'Nay, my lord, thou man of God, do not lie unto thy handmaid.' But the prophet's promise was fulfilled. In due time she rejoiced in a son of her own. How happy she was!

But one harvest-time, when the boy was grown and able to run about, he went with his father to see the reapers at work. The sun was at its full strength, and as the child played in the field, he cried out: 'My head, my head.' The father sent him back to his mother, and she took him on her knees and tried to take away the pain. But all in vain. At noon he lay dead in her arms, and all the poor mother's life was stripped of its glory.

She did not quite despair. She carried her child up to the prophet's room, and laid him on the bed there, and then asked her husband for

one of the asses and for a servant, that she might hasten to the prophet. ‘Wherefore wilt thou go to-day?’ he demanded, ‘it is neither new moon nor the Sabbath day.’ These were the times of special worship, when she rejoiced most to see the prophet. But she could not explain, even to her husband, that her child lay dead. He was always so slow to understand. In an agony of impatience she only answered, ‘Peace,’ meaning that she had no mind to discuss reasons. When the ass was saddled she urged the driver to go forward: ‘Slacken me not the riding except I bid thee.’ So they hurried to Mount Carmel, where the prophet was then living.

When they were still a long way off the prophet saw her riding at full speed, and knew that something was wrong. He sent his servant Gehazi to ask: ‘Is it well with thee? Is it well with thy husband? Is it well with thy son?’ But she could not tell her trouble, her heart was too full of sorrow. She only answered, ‘It is well,’ and hurried on. When she came to Elisha, she leapt from the ass and fell on the ground and caught hold of his feet, but could not utter a word; she was beside herself. Gehazi came

forward to thrust her away. But Elisha was full of sympathy, and said: 'Let her alone; for her soul is bitter within her, and the Lord hath hid it from me and hath not told me.' Then at length, at the sound of the kind, familiar voice, she found words, and said: 'Did I desire a son of my lord? Did I not say, "Do not deceive me?"'

No sooner had she mentioned her son than Elisha knew what her trouble was, and said to Gehazi: 'Hasten and take my staff in thine hand and go thy way; if thou meet any man salute him not: and if any salute thee, answer him not again, and lay my staff upon the face of the child.' Greetings in the East take time, and Gehazi was to press forward without losing a moment. But the lady would not leave Elisha. Her hope was in him only. She said: 'As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee.' So Elisha rose up and followed her.

Gehazi hurried on in front of them, and laid the prophet's staff upon the dead child, but nothing happened. There was neither voice nor hearing. He turned back and met his master,

saying: 'The child is not awaked !' The prophet had hoped that his staff, the sign of his presence and of his power, might have restored life. But Gehazi cared only for himself, and had no real trust in God. He did his master's bidding without interest and without expectation. All the power of Elisha's faith ebbed away when Gehazi was his messenger.

When they came to the house, Elisha shut out Gehazi and the servants of the household, and with the mother alone bowed in prayer. Then he did as Elijah had done. He stretched himself upon the child's lifeless form, and put his mouth upon his mouth, and his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands. He did not know how God would work this miracle, but he felt that he would help the child back to life if only he could drive this deadly cold out of the little body. Elisha waited, and walked once to and fro in the house, and then embraced the child. The boy's flesh was warm, he breathed again, and opened his eyes. Elisha sent for the mother, and said: 'Take up thy son.' She was as speechless with joy as she had been with sorrow. There were no words with which to speak her thanks.



ELISHA RAISING THE SON OF THE SHUNAMMITE.

AFTER THE PICTURE BY LORD LEIGHTON, P.R.A.

by kind permission of Messrs. W.

She could only fall at his feet and bow before him. Then she took up her child and went out.

Here we see Elijah's faith living after him and kindling his successor to the great deed of calling back the dead. These servants of God, with great effort, did once what our Lord did so easily, and three times, when he raised Jairus's daughter, and the widow's son, and Lazarus.

They were true lantern-bearers when, in kindness and gratitude, they trusted God with mighty faith to restore life to the dead. Through them God helped men to come to the confidence that death is only a deeper sleep with a brighter awakening. Through them, too, God's pity, which marks the tears of every mother with empty arms, was made known. Elisha, in his sympathy and tenderness, was foreshadowing what Jesus showed completely, when at Lazarus' grave He wept.

CHAPTER XII

ELISHA, THE MIRACLE-WORKING PROPHET

2 KINGS iv, v, vi.

PERHAPS you have heard how some great artists occasionally painted pictures. They planned the whole painting and drew the outline of the main figures, but they left most of the colouring and all the details to their apprentices and assistants. This helps us to understand the relation in which Elisha stood to his master and forerunner. Elisha taught nothing new, and he did not teach in the same clear, bold way. But by his deeds, and chiefly by his miracles, he kept in the people's minds the truths which Elijah had set forth so strikingly. This was why God gave him power to work more miracles than any other prophet.

Further, he tried to apply to the affairs of the nation the great principles Elijah had laid down, but had never been able to see put into

practice, because King Ahab was so unfriendly to him. Elisha sought to enter into friendly relations with the kings of Israel, and was the first statesman among the prophets. Of this you will learn in the next chapter. Now you must hear how he completed the pictures of God's truth and God's will which Elijah had outlined by his words and life.

You will remember that Elijah spoke his severest condemnation upon Ahab, not for idolatry, but for oppression, because he took possession of Naboth's vineyard. In this way he showed how pitiful God was to the humble and the oppressed and the poor. Elisha had no battles of this kind to fight, but he did several miracles to relieve poor people who were in distress, and thus declared in another way that God remembered them. These miracles might seem to you rather trivial; you might, indeed, wonder why God allowed His prophet to work them, unless you keep this explanation in mind.

The widow of one of the members of a prophetic guild once came to Elisha in sore trouble. Her husband had owed some money which he had never been able to pay, and now the creditor

had determined to sell her two sons into slavery, so that the debt might be repaid. Elisha said to her: 'What shall I do for thee? Tell me, what hast thou in thy house?' She answered: 'Thine handmaid hath not anything in the house save a pot of oil.' Poor thing! she was very needy, without jewels or garments, furniture or cattle, which could be sold. It would have been easy for God to have given her the money at once. He could have rained it from the skies or moved some rich man to send it to her. But she was to learn to help herself even while she was being helped. Also, the blessing she would receive must depend upon her faith.

The prophet therefore said: 'Go, borrow thee vessels abroad of all thy neighbours, even empty vessels; borrow not a few.' Then he instructed her to pour the oil into these vessels, and set aside all that were full. I think the idea came into his mind from his remembrance of Elijah's miracle, when the poor widow's barrel of meal and cruse of oil never failed through many months.

This widow obeyed the prophet exactly. Soon a motley collection of cups and jars and jugs

of all shapes and sizes stood in her room. Her sons brought them one by one, and she filled each with oil from her single pot. It seemed as if the oil would never be exhausted. Vessels, large and small, were filled to the brim, and still there was more. ‘Bring me yet a vessel,’ she cried, but her son answered: ‘There is not a vessel more.’ Then she looked in the pot, and, lo, the oil was finished. She received just as much as she trusted for. If she had collected twice as many vessels, there would have been twice as much oil.

She came and told the prophet, and he said: ‘Go, sell the oil, and pay thy debt, and live, thou and thy sons, on the rest.’ So she was delivered out of her distress, and once more God proved Himself the Friend of the widow and the Father of the fatherless.

In another miracle of a similar simple kind the prophet helped those who helped themselves and were very poor. The guilds of prophets were increasing at this time, for through Elijah’s and Elisha’s work faith in God was growing, and more men felt called to live as comrades of the truth. One of the guilds grew so large that its

members were very crowded in the house where they lived together. They therefore asked permission of Elisha to go down to the woods near the Jordan and cut beams, and build themselves a new and larger house. They were all poor men, and had not money to pay for a new building, but they were all willing to work and erect it with their own labour ; just as the best of the monks built their own monasteries, and made their own gardens, and tilled their own fields.

Elisha gladly approved the idea, and on being pressed to go with them on their wood-cutting expedition, he answered, 'I will go.' When they were come down to the river they were soon all at work. One of them was hewing at a tree which overhung the water, and in his eagerness did not notice that the axehead was loosened. On his next stroke it flew off and disappeared with a splash, and he cried out to Elisha : ' Alas ! my master, for it was borrowed.'

It may seem to you a little thing to lose, but in those days iron was a comparatively rare metal, and costly, especially in Palestine, where there was no iron ore. To the poor prophet the loss was a serious disaster, and Elisha was willing to

help him. Cutting a strong stick from the tree, he cast it into the water where the axehead had sunk, and when it rose to the surface it carried the iron with it, and the prophet said, 'Take it up to thee,' and the man, leaning out, grasped it safely. So the little cloud of anxiety was lifted, and the men returned joyfully to build their house.

You must not think, however, that all the miracles of Elisha were of this household kind. One, in particular, was of great importance to the State, and brought faith to a foreigner who was a famous soldier.

To the north of the land of Israel lay the kingdom of Syria. At this time there were frequent wars between the two kingdoms, and when there was not open war, marauding bands from either nation made raids for plunder, and hurried back with their booty into their own country. In one of these expeditions a Hebrew girl had been carried away captive, and was sold or given to the wife of Naaman, the commander-in-chief of the army of Syria. He was a great general and a mighty warrior, and therefore a favourite with his king, but he had become

leprous. The disease had only shown itself a little while, and he was not yet compelled to go forth from his home and friends, as lepers were obliged to do when the signs of corruption became visible on the face or hands or feet. Still, it was a black shadow on his life, for leprosy was incurable, and it could be but a little while before he would be numbered with the unclean.

The nature of their master's illness was soon whispered through the household, and all except the Hebrew girl felt hopeless. She remembered the miracles of the prophet Elisha, and said to her mistress: 'Would God my lord were with the prophet that is in Samaria! Then would he recover him of his leprosy.' Though a captive she was not ashamed of her own religion, and dared to speak of it openly. Naaman's wife was ready to clutch at any straw in her anxiety, and soon the news was handed on to the king of Syria that there was a wonderful healer in Israel, if only the commander-in-chief could secure his services.

'Nothing can be simpler,' said the king. 'If there be a healer of leprosy in the land of Israel, its king will have to find him.' Forthwith a

letter was written to the king of Israel, asking that Naaman should be healed of his leprosy. Costly robes and great bags of gold and silver were prepared as presents, and the cavalcade, headed by Naaman's chariot, set off for Samaria. Their arrival created something like a panic in the court. The king jumped to the conclusion that this was only a pretext on Syria's part to make war. Rending his garment in despair, he cried: 'Am I a god to kill and make alive?' He had not the faith of the captive Hebrew girl. He appears to have forgotten altogether that there was a prophet in the land, and did not see the opportunity of honouring God in the eyes of a neighbouring nation.

The news of Naaman's visit and the reason for it had spread like wildfire through the city. Elisha could not suffer such disgrace to be put upon his God. He sent a peremptory message to the king: 'Wherefore hast thou rent thy clothes? Let him come now to me, and he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel.'

The king was only too thankful for this way out of his perplexity, and soon Naaman and his gorgeous company were at Elisha's door. What

a stir the horses and chariots made in the quiet street! Now was the prophet honoured indeed, thought the neighbours. What would he say and do?

Naaman, who was accustomed to be treated with great deference, waited impatiently to see the wonder-worker. But Elisha sat within, and did not so much as come to the door, simply sending his servant with the message: 'Go, wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come to thee again, and thou shalt be clean.' Naaman turned away furious. He had no mind to be ordered about like a child. It was enough to be treated as if beneath the notice of the prophet, but to be ordered to bathe in a river of Israel, as if there were no water in Syria! It was beyond bearing.

Elisha had good reasons for keeping in the background. If a miracle were worked all the honour must be given to God, and he would not have this proud Syrian think that the servant of the great God was longing to heal such a distinguished visitor. The power that could heal was infinitely greater than Naaman, and he had to learn due reverence.

The servants of Naaman loved their master, and were sorry to see him turning homeward unhealed, simply because his pride was hurt. They drew near and said: ‘My father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it? How much rather then when he saith to thee, “Wash, and be clean?”’ Naaman’s outburst of anger was quickly over, and he was too great a man not to confess himself in the wrong. He took his servants’ advice and went down to the Jordan. How anxiously they looked upon him when he had dipped once beneath its waters! Perhaps there was no change at all. But what he did he did thoroughly. Seven times he dipped himself in the little river of Israel he had scorned, and then the prophet’s promise was fulfilled. The last trace of his disease was gone. His flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.

It was a changed man who with all his attendants presented himself a little later before the prophet. With all his pride gone, and only gratitude in his heart, he made a brave confession: ‘Behold, now I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel.’ It was a great con-

fession of faith, for in those days, when every nation had its god, even many of the Hebrews did not understand that there was but one God, and that the others were mere names. He went on to say: 'Now therefore, I pray thee, take a present of thy servant.' Elisha refused with a solemn oath: 'As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand, I will receive none.' He was jealous for God's honour. Already many of the prophets were mere hirelings, and he would not have Naaman think that God's servant looked for a reward, or that the Lord could be recompensed for His mercy. Naaman urged him again, but he steadfastly refused. It was he, the spokesman of God, who must be the benefactor, not Naaman.

The Syrian general perceived something of Elisha's thought, and saw that the best way of giving thanks was to ask a further gift. This was the strange request he made: 'If thou wilt not take a gift, yet, I pray thee, let there be given to thy servant two mules' burthen of earth; for thy servant will henceforth offer neither burnt offering nor sacrifice unto other gods, but unto the Lord. In this thing the Lord pardon thy servant; when my master goeth into the house of

Rimmon to worship there, and he leaneth on my hand, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, when I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, the Lord pardon thy servant in this thing.'

Naaman was still only a little child in religion. He had a superstitious feeling that he could worship God better if he had an altar founded on the sacred soil of the country peculiarly God's own. Just in the same fashion the Crusaders brought home from Palestine loads of earth, so that they could make their graves in holy soil.

But it was the other matter which had been troubling him on the way back from the Jordan. He had the mind of a great general, accustomed to plan swiftly and to exercise foresight. Now his thoughts had leapt ahead to his return to Syria. What was he to do, then? He could not believe in the Syrian gods any longer, and was determined that he himself would worship none other than the Lord. Yet he knew well that his king would expect him at his side on State occasions in the temple of the god Rimmon. He could not face breaking with every outward sign of idolatry, so he stated the case quite frankly to Elisha. It was not a very brave plea he made,

but the prophet would neither approve nor condemn. Naaman must settle this matter with God Himself. So Elisha only answered, 'Go in peace,' and Naaman turned homewards.

But there was one who had watched the whole scene to whom Elisha's refusal of a present seemed only foolishness. It was Gehazi, Elisha's servant. He had a quick and clever mind, and sometimes was of great service to his master in practical affairs. It was he who suggested that the lady of Shunem would prize a child beyond every other boon. But he shared neither the prophet's faith nor his unselfishness. After many years with Elisha, he was further off than ever from true faith and obedience. Knowing that Elisha did not hesitate to accept gifts from people of his own race who served the Lord, he felt nothing but anger in seeing this wealthy stranger carry his magnificent offering back with him.

Often he had groaned at the unworldliness which kept the prophet poor. This time he was determined that the chance should not escape him. A plan flashed into his mind, and he hastened after the Syrian general.

Upon observing himself followed, Naaman not

only stopped his chariot, but lighted down from it, true gentleman that he was, and asked eagerly, ‘Is all well?’ ‘All is well,’ was the answer, and then Gehazi told the plausible story he had concocted by the way. Two young prophets from the hill-country, without anything to start them in the world, had just arrived at his master’s house, and his master would be glad to have a talent of silver and two changes of garments for them.

It was not a very likely tale, but, at least, it preserved Elisha’s character for disinterestedness. Naaman was eager to be generous. ‘Do not speak of it,’ he answered, ‘take two talents’; and, after a respectable show of resistance, Gehazi allowed himself to be persuaded. Two of Naaman’s servants acted as porters, for the silver was heavy, and when near home he relieved them of their burthen and speedily had his treasure hidden.

A little breathless, but with all traces of his hasty journey removed, he came in and stood before his master. ‘Whence comest thou, Gehazi?’ were the words that greeted him. Something in his master’s question and in his tone

should have set Gehazi on his guard: now was the moment for confession. How could he hope to blind these keen eyes? But it is hard to turn when once in the path of deceit. Gehazi knew that the prophet's mind was only occasionally quickened to know hidden things, and, risking everything, he answered with a smooth, unblushing lie: 'Thy servant went no whither.'

Then his master turned on him with words that searched his inmost soul: 'Went not mine heart with thee when the man turned again from his chariot to meet thee? Is it a time to receive money and to receive garments, and oliveyards and vineyards, and sheep and oxen, and menservants and maidservants? The leprosy therefore of Naaman shall cleave unto thee and unto thy seed for ever.' All the dreams of pleasure and of wealth which had delighted his imagination were laid bare in their sordidness and meanness, but that was not the worst. Gehazi went from his master's presence a leper as white as snow.

Does it seem to you too terrible a punishment? Yet think how near to God Gehazi had stood, what flashes of God's righteousness and God's

pity he had seen. Had he chosen he might have become a second Elisha. Greedy for gain, the near presence of goodness only filled him with contempt for it. Gehazi helps us to understand how Judas, after three years with our Lord, could still love gold best. This is one of God's laws; the richer the opportunity, the heavier the responsibility, the severer the punishment.

But what of Gehazi's children? The prophet's condemnation was only a warning to him to have none. The leprous father is almost sure to have the leprous child. It was Elisha's way of saying: 'Be the last of your race. Do not pass on your sinfulness; let it end with yourself.'

CHAPTER XIII

ELISHA, PROPHET AND POLITICIAN

2 KINGS VI, VII, IX, X, XIII.

IT has sometimes happened that great preachers have had to take part in political affairs. First they have preached the great truths God made plain to them, and afterwards princes and people have appealed to them for advice. Willingly or unwillingly, they have had to do with the direction of State affairs. Martin Luther was often consulted by the Elector of Saxony and other Protestant princes in Germany; John Knox had much to do with the government of Scotland; in a similar fashion Elisha came to be an adviser of the kings of Israel.

It is easy for God's preachers to make mistakes when they join hands with rulers who do not believe in God as they do. They are tempted to allow what God disapproves, and to look to

man's cunning rather than God's power to bring about the reformation they desire. In this way Martin Luther made great mistakes, and John Knox was not without fault. Long before their day Elisha had stepped on to slippery ground when he sought to purify the religion of Israel by an alliance with her rulers. As we look back we can see that Elijah did more for truth and purity of worship by remaining solitary and apart than Elisha, who was for so long a trusted counsellor of kings. Yet this was the work God had given Elisha to do, and it is to his honour that amid so many difficulties he failed only once or twice to keep the Lord's glory undimmed.

It is easy to see how Elisha gained his great influence.

At the time that Syria and Israel were at war God sometimes revealed to him the plans of the enemy, and he used this knowledge to warn his king of danger. It was during the reign of Joram, Ahab's second son, that Elisha was of conspicuous service in this way. Joram had forsaken the worship of Baal, and Elisha felt free to help him when it served God's cause to do so. The Syrians at this time were not conducting a

regular campaign, but they planned raids against particular places. Elisha, knowing beforehand which city was to suffer attack, informed the king of Israel, who massed his troops there, and drove back the enemy. This happened two or three times. Elisha was of more value to the army than a whole company of spies and intelligence officers.

The king of Syria was filled with vexation and alarm. However secret his plans, they were always discovered. At last he called a council of war, and said to his officers : ‘ Will ye not show me which of us is for the king of Israel ? ’ One of them answered : ‘ Nay, my lord the king ; but Elisha the prophet that is in Israel telleth the king of Israel the words that thou speakest in thy bed-chamber.’ This was quite a new idea to the king of Syria ; but he thought of Elisha as a kind of magician, not as the servant of the all-powerful God. He immediately planned to attack the prophet rather than the king, and learning through his spies that Elisha was at Dothan, sent a whole army by secret and forced marches to surround the city by night.

Elisha’s young servant happened to awaken

early that morning, and went out of the city. To his horror, he discovered that they were completely hemmed in by an army with horses and chariots, so that there was no way of escape. He brought the alarming news to Elisha, saying : 'Alas, my master, how shall we do ?' Elisha answered quite calmly : 'Fear not, for they that be with us are more than they that be with them.'

These must have sounded like the words of a madman to the servant ; but Elisha, seeing his amazement, prayed : 'Lord, I pray Thee, open his eyes that he may see.' Then the young man's eyes were opened to the invisible, and lo, round about his master and himself the mountain-side was full of chariots and horses of fire. This reminds us of the saying of our Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane : 'Thinkest thou that I cannot beseech My Father, and He shall even now send Me twelve legions of angels ?'

This vision, however, was the sign, not the means, of the deliverance of Elisha. He prayed that the Syrians might be smitten with blindness, and just as if the dazzling light of a heavenly army had seared their eyes, they lost their sight. Then said Elisha ironically : 'This

is not the way, neither is this the city ; follow me, and I will bring you to the man ye seek.' They were thankful not to be destroyed on the spot, and obediently followed him, and he led them into Samaria. Safely within the city and in the presence of the king and his soldiers, who had gathered promptly on receiving the news, the Syrians were prisoners.

Elisha now prayed that their sight might be restored. With blank faces they looked about them, and discovered themselves trapped. I think their hands sought their swords, for the king of Israel, half beside himself, cried out : ' My father, shall I smite them, shall I smite them ? ' This was the very opposite of Elisha's thought. He answered immediately : ' Thou shalt not smite them. Wouldest thou smite those whom thou hast taken captive with thy sword and with thy bow ? Set bread and water before them, that they may eat and drink, and go to their master.' Nobly spoken ! In such words shone forth the magnanimity of God. The king hastened to make great provision for these unexpected visitors, and sent them back to their master well fed and not a little humbled.

You can imagine what a well-known figure Elisha was after this incident, and how many waverers would lean more strongly upon God.

Until this ignominious failure on the part of Syria was forgotten there was peace for a while. But Ben-hadad, the king of Syria, could not rest while the neighbouring kingdom prospered. Gathering a great host, he swept down from the north, and, driving the men of Israel before him, drew his troops tightly round Samaria, and sat down to starve it into submission. The onset had been so sudden that the city was almost without stores. A great famine began, and all the horrors of a stubborn siege. An ass's head was sold for fifty pieces of silver, and even filthy refuse, if at all eatable, had its price. When dark stories reached the palace that cannibalism had begun in the city, the horror-stricken king rent his garments, and swore that Elisha should be beheaded that very day.

Why did he propose to wreak his anger on Elisha? Either because he thought that the prophet, by his wonder-working power, could raise the siege if he chose, or, more probably, because the prophet inspired the people to continue

resistance by the promise of certain deliverance. Just as a minister of religion was the soul of the defence of Londonderry in its famous siege by the troops of James II., so Elisha seems to have been the strongest man in Samaria in that dark hour.

The elders of the city were gathered round him in his own house when the king's messenger arrived. If he came to take Elisha prisoner, he thought better of it when he found him in such company, and instead, gave one brief message from the king: 'Why should I wait for the Lord any longer? behold, this evil is of the Lord.' The king meant to say that since the present affliction was from God's hand, it was useless to look for deliverance, since such was plainly not His will.

Then Elisha made a wonderful prediction: 'Hear ye the words of the Lord; thus saith the Lord, "To-morrow about this time shall a measure of fine flour be sold for a silver piece, and two measures of barley for a silver piece in the gate of Samaria."

The king's favourite officer was present, and scouted the prophet's words as the sheerest ab-

surdity. He jeered at Elisha's confidence in God, saying : 'Behold, if the Lord should make windows in heaven, might this thing be ?' Without any bandying of words with this scoffer, Elisha replied : 'Behold, thou shalt see it with thine eyes, but shalt not eat thereof.'

As the famine-stricken city sank to sleep that night, and the enfeebled guard crept round the walls, four lepers, who had been driven in from the surrounding country by terror of the invading army, and were now in the last stage of starvation, came to a desperate resolution. They would go to the camp of the Syrians. If they were slain they would die but an hour the sooner, and possibly they might be kept alive. In that case they would at least have food.

In the twilight they stole from the city they thought doomed, and with utmost care approached the outer entrenchments of the Syrian army. They feared to be shot down without a chance of declaring themselves. But as they strained their ears for the footfall of a sentinel, not a sound reached them. Advancing more quickly, they ventured into a tent. There was no one there. Then it dawned upon them that

the camp was deserted. A sudden panic had seized the Syrians. They had fancied that they heard the noise of a great host advancing upon them, and instantly concluding that the king of Israel had hired great armies of the Hittites and Egyptians against them, they had fled pell-mell for the Jordan.

The lepers fell like wolves on the food in the first tent they entered ; then they despoiled it of the silver and gold and garments they found there, and hid them. They did the same by a second tent, and then the memory of the starving city flashed upon them. They said to one another : ‘We do not well : this day is a day of good tidings, and we hold our peace : if we tarry till the morning light, our iniquity will find us out : now therefore come, and let us tell the king’s household.’

Hurrying back through the darkness to the city, they called to the porter at the gate. He could not leave his post, but roused the other porters, who carried the news to the king’s household. The king was quickly awake, but he damped the hopes of the starving, excited crowd by his suspicion of an ambush set for

hungry men. What if it were but a trick of the Syrians to wile them from the city and then fall upon them? Before the story of the lepers could be accepted, it must be tested. Two chariots, with five of the few remaining horses, must go forth to see.

How the hours lagged till the messengers returned, but with what joy their news was received! All the way to the Jordan they had followed the track of the fleeing army, marked at every step by garments and vessels and weapons, cast away to hasten their flight. There was no doubt now. The city was awake, and poured out to the camp, and in the gateway where public business was done the throng was thickest. There a measure of fine flour was sold for a silver piece, as the prophet had foretold, and barley half as cheap again. As the king's favourite officer strove to keep order or to force back the famished crowds, he fell, and the multitude surged over him. The prophet's word which he had scorned was literally fulfilled. He saw the abundance of food, but tasted it not.

In this strange fashion God delivered the nation and the king from the worst disaster. Once more

He gave them clear testimony that He cared for them and desired them to be His own. It was His last appeal to the royal house of Ahab. If there was not repentance now, nothing on earth could secure it.

A little while passed, but King Joram made no change. He, with his brother-in-law Ahaziah, king of Judah, fought against the Syrians, but neither of them fought against the sin in their own kingdoms. Baal-worship still flourished in Samaria ; the golden bulls were worshipped in Dan and Bethel ; the nation, as a whole, was sinking deeper in idolatry and vice. The last sands in the hour-glass had run out. The hour had come for the rule of Ahab's house to end.

It was Elisha who put the torch to the smouldering embers of rebellion. There was a popular young cavalry officer called Jehu, famous for his furious driving, and full of vehement energy. Him Elisha singled out to be the new king. He ordered one of the band of the prophets, who were all at his command, to go to Ramoth-Gilead, where Jehu was on active service, and to anoint him there as king of Israel to be

the executioner of God's anger on the house of Ahab.

A vivid picture is given us of the officers' mess-room when Jehu returned from his private interview with the prophet. One of his brother-officers at once greeted him with the question, 'Is all well? Wherefore came this mad fellow to thee?' All the prophets were madmen to the men of the world of that day. Jehu tried to put them off by saying, 'Ye know the man and the kind of talk,' for the prophet had met all the captains before seeing Jehu alone. But they shouted: 'It is false: tell us now.' Then he took them into his confidence, and said: 'Thus and thus spake he to me, saying: "Thus saith the Lord, 'I have anointed thee king over Israel.'" At once the affair was taken out of Jehu's hands. Without a twinge of jealousy his fellow-soldiers rallied round him. Hastening to the top of the stairs above the barrack-ground, and putting their garments under his feet as a sign of honour, they blew the trumpet, and cried: 'Jehu is king!'

From that moment Jehu was like one possessed by the spirit of slaughter and borne on the wings of the wind. He flew from city to city, with his

blood-stained sword in hand, until he was established on the throne. Joram and Ahaziah and the aged Jezebel fell first. Then seventy sons of Ahab and forty-two of the brothers of Ahaziah were slain in Jezreel. Finally, all the worshippers of Baal were tricked into assembling in their temple, and were there destroyed in cold blood.

The popular young officer no sooner possessed power than he became one of the cruellest and most contemptible of men. It is true he wiped out the worshippers of Baal ; but that was no more than a stroke of policy to make his throne secure, for they were all upholders of Ahab's house. He himself was destitute of true religion, and followed in the footsteps of Jeroboam I., and cultivated the worship of the golden bulls.

I think Elisha must have been troubled when he saw the cruelties of Jehu, whom he had caused to be anointed to the throne. But he did not rebuke him for going so far beyond the commands of the Lord, and it may be that he believed Jehu to be doing God's will by these cold-blooded murders. But at least we know that neither did he commend Jehu ; he left him severely alone. The prophets, just a century

later, saw clearly that this blood-shedding was a great outrage against God. The tender spirit of Hosea, in particular, was filled with horror at the memory. When his firstborn son was given to him, he called his name 'Jezreel' by Divine command, because, said the Lord, 'I will avenge the blood of Jezreel upon the house of Jehu, and the kingdom of Israel shall cease.'

Elisha was not a young man when he began his prophetic work, and he lived to a great age. Even when bedridden he still cared for Israel with a strong love. As he lay sick with his last sickness, Joash, the young king of Israel, came down to visit him, having heard that he was dying. The king remembered all that he had done for Israel, and wept over him, crying: 'My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and the horsemen thereof.' These were the very words Elisha had used of Elijah. Did they give the prophet, quietly dying in his bed, some assurance that he had been able to carry on the work of his master who had passed from him in the whirlwind of flame?

Perhaps they roused him, for he immediately showed himself eager to inspire the king to fresh

energy in the protection of Israel. He checked the young man's tears by telling him to take bow and arrows. When the king had obeyed, the prophet said: 'Put thine hand upon the bow.' And he laid his trembling old hands upon the king's hands, as if he would bequeath something of his own skill and force to these inexperienced fingers.

Then he bade the king open the window eastward and shoot. He shot, and as the arrow whizzed from the string, Elisha said: 'The Lord's arrow of victory, even the arrow of victory over Syria; for thou shalt smite the Syrians in Aphek till thou have consumed them.' Then he bade the king take the arrows and smite upon the ground. He had shown that these acts he required were symbolic—that is, had special meanings—and that every arrow signified a victory. But when the king had shot three arrows he stopped. Like a good many people, he could weep plentifully for another; but could not understand what that other desired, or take trouble to provide it. Elisha, even in his feebleness, was wroth with him, and said: 'Thou shouldest have smitten five or six times, then hadst thou smitten

Syria till thou hadst consumed it ; whereas now thou shalt smite Syria but thrice.'

Joash was what we call a sentimentalist, quick with tears and fine words, but easily wearied in deeds, and slow to see the claim of duty upon him. How great a contrast to Elisha, resolute of spirit and tenacious of purpose to the end, eager, though upon the brink of the grave, to do a last deed for God and for his beloved land.

CHAPTER XIV

AMOS, THE HERDSMAN-PROPHET

AMOS I—IX.

ABOUT twelve miles south from Jerusalem, in the direction of the desert, there rises a rocky hill, upon which may still be seen the crumbling ruins of a village called Tekôa.

Many centuries before the birth of our Lord it had come into existence, no one quite knows why or how, its little grey houses huddled together, the homes of a poor folk dwelling in a bare, bleak country. Once upon a time a wise woman had gone thence to see King David, and that was an event to figure largely in the stories that were handed down from father to child. No one would have guessed that the name of so humble a spot would come to be linked with that of one of God's great prophets, and yet so it was to be.

In the reigns of Jeroboam II., that mighty

ruler of the northern kingdom, and of Uzziah, the king of Judah, there lived among the shepherds of Tekâa a man named Amos. All his days he had eaten sparingly and slept hard, for on those rocky slopes, where, later, John the Baptist wandered and our Lord went fasting for forty days, men made a bare living. His business was to herd the little mountain sheep, and after the shearing to carry the wool to the markets of Palestine.

Here Amos would roam in search of the scant pasturage for his sheep, guarding them from the beasts that howled by night beneath the burning stars, and dealing warily with the marauding Arabs, who could prove such cruel foes. For other occupation he was a sycamore-dresser, a man who looked after the sycamore-trees that grew a little lower down the hill-side, the poor watery figs of which were as luxuries to the people of the wilderness. Sometimes in his wanderings he would see far below him the intense blue of the Dead Sea, and sometimes against the sky the towers of Jerusalem. Only in spring, when the young grass turned the grey to green, did this country take on a kindly

aspect, or when the deep rose of the setting sun flushed it into momentary loveliness, like a smile on a harsh face.

He was not, however, by any means cut off from the world. A walk of about three miles took him to the road running between Hebron and Beersheba, where he might meet with men of many kinds ; and sometimes he would journey northwards to sell his wool, and there learned how things went in the busy world. He paced the streets of the cities where the rich made their homes, and looked into the lives of men who, far from wresting a bare existence from a barren soil, lived softly and luxuriously, and were growing greedy and selfish.

In the kingdom of Judah such evils were evident enough, but up in the north, in the kingdom of Israel, things looked strangely indeed to the man from the desert. These were prosperous days for Israel. Her enemy, Syria, who had so often come down upon the little nation like a blight, was occupied now with the task of keeping at bay her own great enemy, Assyria. She had no strength for other warfare.

Jeroboam II., a great warrior, held his realm

with a steady hand, and had made successful inroads on the neighbouring countries. He ruled over almost as big and wealthy a nation as David himself. Everywhere could be seen signs of the wealth and prosperity of the people. Palaces reared their towers to the blue sky, merchants built themselves spacious houses, the vineyards and olive-gardens lay stretched in the sunshine, and over all was a pleasant air of contentment and well-being.

And the people were not careless about their religion. Though they had not a temple like the people of Judah, they paid great respect to their own sanctuaries, particularly to Bethel and Dan, where the two great golden bulls had been placed as symbols of the Lord. Here they gathered to their feasts, offering their very best upon the altars, and sitting down afterwards to the roast flesh and the wine, with laughter and gladness. Music and lovely draperies made such scenes beautiful to the ear and eye. It seemed as though they had never been so blessed before.

And yet the young shepherd looked on with wondering contempt. He stretched his limbs, that owed their lean strength to hard work and

spare living in the open air, and longed for the freedom of the clean, bare mountain-side. The men he looked upon here were soft, like women, loving food and wine for the pleasure of eating and drinking, decking themselves out with fine clothes, and lying upon elegant couches with silken cushions.

And as he came oftener he found other things that filled him with bitter anger. For the men who worked for these comfortable, wealthy masters were of quite another sort. Famished and insufficiently clad, treated with contempt and injustice, cheated and overworked, they lived as best they might, with neither rights nor self-respect. What could it all mean? Back went Amos to the wilderness, to the vast spaces and vaster silence, to the bare, hard life, with its freedom and open air, to pray to God as he had never prayed before.

Now, no one prays to God with his whole heart without learning to see very clearly; and the oftener Amos took his journey northwards, and the more he prayed, the more his heart burned within him. Was not the worship of people like these mere self-indulgence? Was

it not a blasphemy against God Himself? Everywhere he saw selfishness and sin, nowhere repentance. It seemed to him that God was long-suffering to withhold His anger, but more and more clearly, as he watched and waited, he learned that the day of punishment was not far off.

And then at last he began to speak. Here and there he raised his voice fearlessly, till presently his name was passed from mouth to mouth, and he became a marked figure.

It was at the great autumn feast at Bethel that his anger burst out in all its fierceness.

Here, in the place where Jacob had dreamed that angels passed up and down a heavenly stair, the first king of the Northern Kingdom had raised a golden bull in the name of the Lord, and thither flocked the gay, luxurious crowds from Samaria to perform their religious duties. If anyone had questioned them as to the spirit of their worship they would have been greatly surprised. They were a pleasure-loving people, who, feeling safe from their enemies, came to make merry because God had blessed them. There could be no doubt, they would have

answered, that the Lord was pleased with them. They spared no expense in their sacrifices ; their religious services were exceedingly beautiful, and always thronged with people.

Then suddenly, this year of all years, when they had never felt better satisfied with themselves and their lot, when the wine sparkled in the cups and the air was heavy with the savoury smell of roast flesh, a strange thing happened. The sound of a dirge came down the breeze, and in their midst appeared the bare, gaunt figure of a hill-man, wailing his tidings of death and desolation :

‘The virgin of Israel is fallen ;
She shall no more arise ;
She is cast down upon her land ;
There is none to raise her up.’

In blank amazement men paused in their feasting, women rose in dismay ; and on went the singer, breaking out at last into fearless prophecy. He was telling them to seek the Lord, but not at Bethel, or Gilgal, or Beersheba, for these sanctuaries should pass into captivity and come to nought. He was declaring the wrath of God upon their evil lives. He reminded

his hearers that some of them fancied they longed for the day of the Lord, but that day, when it should come, should be utterly dark, without any light at all. God had spoken to him, and had declared that He hated and despised their feasts, with their sacrifices of fat beasts, and their music. Let judgment roll down like waters and righteousness as a mighty stream. He asked them whether in the forty years' wandering in the desert they had won the favour of Jehovah with sacrifices, for it was then that God had taken them to be His own. 'Woe! woe!' he cried to them, and, like a gathering tempest, poured out his prophecy of evils, ending by declaring that the house of Jeroboam should fall by the sword.

Meanwhile, Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, had been listening in angry dismay to this fellow Amos, of whom he had heard often enough, and who had managed to cast a gloom over a gorgeous occasion. Here, at last, was something he could use against him, for was he not attacking the king himself?

Instantly he despatched a messenger to Jeroboam, saying: 'Amos hath conspired against

thee in the midst of the house of Israel. The land is not able to bear all his words. For thus Amos saith, “Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel shall surely be led away captive out of his land.”

Then he turned upon Amos with all the insolence of a high official towards a person of no rank. ‘Amos, O thou seer, go flee thee away into the land of Judah, and there eat bread and prophesy there; but prophesy not again any more at Bethel, for it is a king’s sanctuary and it is a royal house.’ To Amaziah it was a matter of far greater importance that Bethel belonged to the king than that it was sacred to God. He accused Amos of begging, too, for he told him to go away into Judah, where he properly belonged. There he might prophesy and get bread.

But Amos knew no fear of rank or wealth. Above them all he saw the infinite majesty of God. He answered scornfully, indignant that he should be thought a mere professional prophet, plying his trade for gain: ‘I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet’s son; but I was an herdman and a gatherer of sycomore fruit: and the Lord took me as I followed the flock, and

the Lord said unto me, “Go, prophesy unto My people Israel.” And then, because Amaziah was a bad priest, not caring for the real glory of God, he declared that punishment should overtake him.

So came and went the greatest moment of Amos’s life, when he spoke the message of the Lord to the people to whom it was sent. But from that time he was silenced, and no doubt he returned once more to the wilderness of Tekôa to lead his flock of mountain sheep and to gather the poor fruit of the sycomore-trees.

But his work was by no means ended, for now a great thought came to him. He could speak no more—at least, to the people who needed it most—but there was yet another way. He would write down the things he had learned from God. And thus he became the first of the writing prophets.

We do not know that he wrote with his own hand, in rough, scrawling letters, laboriously penned in the long, quiet hours in the upland solitudes. It is more likely that some scribe who had heard him and seen the truth of his words, wrote at his dictation, and so gave us the

book that bears his name. Somehow he got it written, and left it as his legacy to the nation.

He begins this book without any mention of Israel at all. He is declaring the wrath of God upon the six surrounding nations for such sins as treachery, cruelty, and greed. He was thus teaching his own people that God was the God even of nations who did not worship Him, not merely of one little country. But when at last he turns to Israel, he warns her that her punishment shall be very heavy, for she has sinned, knowing God.

That the doom is coming they may be very sure if they will but give heed to the signs. He takes pictures from his own life to make them understand. For instance, he reminds them of that awful desert sound—the roar of a lion that has taken his prey. Just so God utters this cry through His prophet because His hand is already stretched out upon His ungrateful people. Again he says: 'Shall the trumpet be blown in the city and the people not be afraid?' His voice of warning is like the alarm sounded in some little desert town upon the approach of an enemy. They would do well to fear.

Then he tells how he saw God preparing a great host of locusts to devour every green thing in the land just when the grain was ready for cutting. But he prayed God to have mercy, and the plague was withheld. It seemed to him that God now took fire for His weapon, and this was still more terrible. Like all the people of his day, Amos believed that the earth was flat and rested upon a vast ocean of water, which was called 'the great deep.' When a drought came it was believed that the waters of the great deep had been dried up. It seemed to Amos that God, having dried up these waters with His fire, was about to consume the land as well. But once more he prayed, and again God withheld His avenging hand.

And now the prophet had a strange vision. Like all desert-dwellers, he was much interested in building operations in the cities, and had sometimes stood and watched the masons trying if a wall was exactly upright by hanging from its top a line with a weight at the end, which necessarily hung straight down. This is called a plumbline. If the wall did not answer the test, then it had to be pulled down. In his vision he

beheld above the wall of a city the mysterious presence of the Lord Himself with a plumbline in His hand. The Lord said to him, 'What seest thou, Amos?' He answered, 'A plumbline.' Then said the Lord, 'Behold I will set a plumbline in the midst of My people Israel; I will not again pass by them any more.' They were to be cast down like all badly built walls because they did not answer the simplest test of all—the test of uprightness.

And how was this ruin to be wrought? Amos sees upon the horizon a new enemy, who shall prove the scourge Israel required, and this prophecy was to be proved but too true. Little more than a quarter of a century later, the Assyrians, having conquered Syria, were to sweep the whole of the Northern Kingdom into captivity—a captivity from which they returned no more.

The certainty of destruction is the one thing Amos presses relentlessly home. Again and again he tells them that there is no escape for a nation unrepentant. But it was just this that people found so difficult to believe. They thought that whatever they did God would

protect them. They could see for themselves that when heathen nations perished their gods perished with them. They could not believe that their God would perish, and therefore thought that they were safe. They were now to learn that the fall of Israel would only mean the victory of the God of Israel. With all their wealth and civilization, they were more and more forgetting the truths they had once known, truths that were being offered to them once again by a man whom they despised—a shepherd of the wilderness.

It was just because he came out of the wilderness, and was not one with the people to whom he was the voice of condemnation, that he was lacking in the greatest thing of all. He had no love, and therefore no sorrow. For the poor and downtrodden he had indignation, and twice he prayed that a scourge should be turned away; but on the whole it is the voice of the judge we hear, and a judge who stood absolutely apart from the poor foolish people who had sinned, and who refused to understand.

We do not know his end, for apart from such things as are inseparable from his message he

tells us nothing. He had given himself to God to be no more than a voice to proclaim the purpose of the Lord to Israel. We know not when that voice fell silent, but its echoes sound loud across the Christian world to-day.

CHAPTER XV

HOSEA, THE PROPHET OF LOVE

HOSEA II, III, VI, XI, XIV.

SOME years after Amos had returned to the wilderness of Tekóá, another great prophet, called Hosea, arose to teach Israel. This time it was not a stranger who, when the people hated and reviled him, could go back to his simple shepherd life in the Southern Kingdom, but one of themselves, a native of Samaria, who had grown up there, and who loved the people so much that the thought of their evil ways and of the punishment they were drawing down was a perpetual sorrow to him. It is as if an American had come to Britain to predict her destruction, and when he retired across the Atlantic, one of ourselves felt compelled to declare the same ominous tidings about the nation we all love.

Nor did Hosea tell of quite the same things. As we have seen, Amos came from a poor bare country, having, indeed, spent much of his life in a tent. The sight of the magnificent houses and their costly furniture, in contrast with the poverty of the working folk, impressed him deeply. He is always telling us how the palaces and houses of every kind shall be laid in ruins.

Hosea, on the other hand, had seen these things since childhood, and just because familiar with them, he has little to say about them. Not that he was less indignant when he saw the poor trodden down. That was one of the terrible signs to him that the people had gone far astray. But he was always looking into the very heart of the evil, and he saw that before people could do righteously they must have quite a changed idea of God ; they must learn to love Him.

The story of his own life was very sad. By nature he was pure and gentle and sensitive, and he seems to have belonged to the ruling class in Israel. He had married a girl called Gomer, the daughter of a man of the common people, and had taken her to his house in Samaria. No doubt he thought of the beautiful life he and she

would live together because they loved each other, and that in the midst of so much that was ugly and sad he would always have this quiet place of refuge, where his wife would share his sorrow and his prayers. But even by the time God sent them their first little child, Hosea had discovered that she was quite indifferent to the holiness and the worship of God ; she was very selfish, and only cared to enjoy herself.

Then one day, after about six years, she ran away altogether, leaving her husband with three tiny children. She did not care in the least what became of them all. She only wanted to get away amongst people who did not trouble her with thoughts that were too high for her, and who, because she was pretty and graceful and had pleasant ways, would just let her amuse herself as she liked best. She did not love anyone enough to want to work for them.

Hosea, left alone with the three little children, almost broke his heart. He loved Gomer very dearly, and had done everything in his power to make her life safe and happy ; his home was desolate without her. But the greatest anguish of all lay in seeing the baseness and emptiness of

her nature. In his distress he turned more than ever to prayer. And as he prayed he began to learn many things which, without this sorrow, could never have come to him. He received the gift of vision, and saw the love of God for His people in a new and wonderful way.

The nations round about Israel all had their gods, and they worshipped them and sacrificed to them in order that the ground should be fruitful, and that they should be fortunate in their undertakings.

But with Israel how different ! How wonderful was her relation to God ! When the people had been nothing more than slaves in Egypt, ignorant, despised, and downtrodden, God had looked upon them and loved them. How tenderly He had led them out of bondage and had cared for them in the wilderness, raising up great leaders to guide them, and finally setting them safely in the pleasant land of Palestine, where they might make their homes and worship Him in peace. The covenant between God and Israel was no bargain such as the heathen made, who gave to their god because they expected to receive good things in return. God's love was like the love of

a father for his son and of a husband for his wife —the love that singles out the loved one and gives without stint. The only return that can be made must be love and gratitude.

Then again the heathen believed that the god they worshipped was one of their own forefathers, and that since he was very like themselves he did not care much for righteousness. But the God of Israel was the God of the whole world, Who had chosen out of His mercy to care for this nation as His little child. Just because He was the source of all goodness, He could not but make a ceaseless demand that evil of every kind should be put out of His people's lives.

As Hosea dwelt upon this, he began to understand very clearly that just as he himself suffered in the baseness and ingratitude of his wife, so, in a vast and infinite sense, God was sorrowing over this people who had cast Him off, who had failed to give love for love, and who offered their sacrifices to the golden bulls in the hope of good things to eat and fine things to wear.

They had done much to awaken His anger, but Hosea saw that although God had been thus cast off by His people, and they walked in paths

He had forbidden, yet even greater than His anger was His love. They lied, and murdered, and stole, and were eager to pray to any stock or stone if they thought they could gain anything by it. Still God was not only ready but longing to forgive, if they would but turn and repent.

Slowly Hosea came to see that his love for Gomer must be like God's love for His people. He must search her out and bring her back, and be ready to love her none the less tenderly for her weakness and sin. He knew well enough that these friends who promised her so much did not really love her. If she was sick, they would leave her to die ; if she lost her prettiness and her gift of amusing them, they would forsake her. So with patience and love he sought for her, and brought her back to the home she had deserted, and tried to show her by his love how far wrong she had gone.

We know nothing more about Hosea's life. I fear it was sad to the end. He tells us so much only that we may understand how through his own pain he came to know the pity and tenderness of God. I think if real happiness had come to his home he would have told us. All through



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the rest of his book, which is full of thoughts of God's dealings with His people, he speaks as if feeling his own disappointed hopes. Many of his sentences are like sobs and sighs. It is the book of a bleeding heart.

First, we hear the voice of the Lord calling the nation to repentance. He pleads with them to remember His care for them, and tells them how He is waiting to forgive all their want of trust and their wickedness. Nowhere in the whole Bible until we come to the New Testament do we have such a picture of the Love of God. It is no longer the voice of the Judge we hear. It is the cry of the eternal Father Who so loved the world that when all else had failed He would not withhold His Beloved Son.

Ephraim being the leading tribe, the prophet nearly always speaks of the people by this name. Once Ephraim seems to repent, and the prophet imagines the people saying :

' Come and let us return unto the Lord ;
For He hath torn, and He will heal us ;
He hath smitten, and He will bind us up.
After two days will He revive us :
In the third day He will raise us up,
And we shall live in His sight.'

Then shall we know, if we follow on to know the Lord :

His going forth is prepared as the morning ;
And He shall come unto us as the rain,
As the spring and the autumn rain unto the earth.'

But very beautiful though this is, it is not the cry of a people who hate their sin. It is only their longing to be comforted that we hear.

Then comes the sad answer of the Lord, as the prophet sees that the people do not really repent :

‘ O Ephraim, what shall I do unto thee ?
O Judah, what shall I do unto thee ?
For your goodness is as the morning cloud,
And as the early dew it goeth away.’

Ephraim was not really changed. The words were mere words, and the thought of turning again to God was speedily forgotten. If Gomer at last, through the love of her husband, came to learn better things, the people, as a whole, did not ; they turned deaf ears to the prophet. They hated him for his disapproval. They refused to look at the wonderful picture he held before their eyes. They called him mad and a fool.

Now, the greatest sin that has ever been sinned is to reject the love of God when it has been made quite clear and shining to us. Our Lord called this the sin against the Holy Spirit. When the people of Israel barred the doors of their hearts against the love of God, they also shut out His forgiveness. Then the voice of God, speaking through His prophet, became stern indeed. Hosea did not altogether cease to plead with them, but he began to make pictures of the awful punishment which drew ever nearer. Sometimes he spoke of what is destructive in cities, and sometimes of the destroyers of the open country. God will be like the moth to the garment, eating it till only dust is left, and like rottenness, which corrupts food and makes it useless and offensive. God, too, will be like the young lion, leaping on its prey, and like the water-flood in its sudden onset, from which nothing can escape.

The message of God's anger was as fruitless as the message of His love. Hosea continued his prophecies over many years, but everything grew worse.

When he first began, Jeroboam II. was still

king. When this great warrior died, his son reigned only six months, being murdered by one called Shallum. For only one short month Shallum occupied the throne, then fell in his turn by the hand of Menahem, who did succeed in ruling for ten years. The nation had passed into the darkest trouble and confusion. Their prosperity was at an end. Hosea pictures the country as an oven which devoured the kings by its heat. There was no thought now of a governor appointed by God to rule in His name. The people had become more than ever openly sinful, and the very priests were hand in glove with murderers and robbers.

No wonder that the cry of the prophet grew still sadder, while none paused to listen. Like a swarm of distracted insects, the leaders turned now one way, now another for help. Sometimes they sent to Egypt and sometimes to Syria for protection. Indeed, Menahem became no more than a Syrian vassal, purchasing his safety by a heavy tribute. Then Hosea warns the people of a coming day when all such foreign aid will be useless. Like Amos, he foretells the carrying away of the nation into captivity. With tears,

not with thunders in his voice, he speaks. He dares to represent God saying: ‘How shall I give thee up, Ephraim ? How shall I deliver thee, Israel ? How shall I make thee as the cities of the plain ? Mine heart is turned within Me, My compassions are kindled together.’ But just because he knew the tenderness of God’s love to Israel, his prophecy of coming punishment was the more absolutely reliable. The foretelling of the captivity was only the sign that love had done its utmost and had failed.

But the book does not close in sadness. The shadows that were gathering about the soul of Hosea were lightened by a wide and beautiful assurance. He had learnt so much of the glory of the love of God that even though men might reject it he knew the day of final triumph to be certain. He pleads with Israel once more, and then there bursts from him the promise of the fulness of God’s forgiveness to be made known in some blessed day of repentance and trust.

‘ I will heal their backsliding,
I will love them freely ;
For Mine anger is turned away from them.
I will be as the dew unto Israel :

He shall blossom as the lily,
And strike his roots deep as Lebanon,
His branches shall spread,
And his beauty shall be as the olive,
And his smell as Lebanon.
They that dwell under his shadow shall return ;
They shall revive as the corn
And blossom as the vine.'

I hope that you now understand how great and how original a prophet Hosea was. No one before him had understood the tenderness and pitifulness of God ; Moses, indeed, had proclaimed the Divine mercifulness, but only in a measure. Hosea made a greater advance in a brief ten years of personal sorrow than the prophets of five centuries before him. To pass from Amos to this prophet is like passing at one bound from winter into spring—a rainy, backward spring, with little sunshine, but with all the gentleness and softness of the days when the last long frost is past. Amos had preached justice with a voice that rang like a trumpet ; Hosea, out of the depth of his own suffering, spoke in broken tones of love. And he made this great discovery : love is no less love when it disapproves, when it is angry. The hand of love may hold the rod of

punishment, but the eyes of love are full of tears.

So clear was his vision that he made a great advance on other prophets of the past in more than one way. Elijah had thundered against the worship of Baal, but had said nothing of the worship of God under the appearance of golden bulls at Bethel and at Dan. Hosea saw that these outward symbols turned the people's heart from true obedience. He condemned them as rivals of the unseen God.

When Jehu, at Elisha's command, had slain the idolatrous king of Israel, he waded through rivers of blood to the throne, slaying everyone whom he feared, and often by the vilest treachery. Elisha uttered no word of condemnation, perhaps because he thought that all the enemies of God deserved to die, by however cruel a death. Hosea knew better the heart of God, the Father and Husband of Israel, and foretold the fall of Jehu's family because of the shameful murders of that cruel king.

And so you see that God unfolded His truth to His prophets as they were able to receive it. Oftentimes, that they might receive new light,

they had to endure the bitterest sorrow. It was at once the glory and the sadness of the greatest prophets that they saw far beyond the thoughts of the people among whom they lived. The very truths for which they were afterwards read and loved had made their first hearers revile them or turn unheedingly away. No prophet had to pass through deeper sorrows than Hosea, the tender-hearted, but there was not one of God's lantern-bearers whose light was more like that of Jesus Christ, Who wept over Jerusalem, and prayed upon the cross for His executioners, and made it possible for His most understanding Apostle to write, 'God is love.'

CHAPTER XVI

ISAIAH, PROPHET AND STATESMAN

ISAIAH III, V—IX.

JUST about the time that Amos and Hosea were finishing their work, Isaiah, the first great prophet of the kingdom of Judah, began his long career. Elijah, Elisha, and Hosea were all born in the kingdom of Israel, and had fulfilled their mission as seers within its bounds. Even Amos, though he belonged to Judah, had proclaimed his prophecy in the Northern Kingdom. Now, however, the predicted fall was at hand, and the centre of interest passes to the smaller and southern land.

All the remaining prophets of whom you will hear were Jews, belonging to the tribe of Judah. When Assyria swooped like a great eagle upon the ten tribes and carried them in her talons a thousand miles away, they were for ever lost to sight among her many exiles. We call them the

lost tribes. But for nearly a century and a half afterwards the descendants of David ruled in Jerusalem, and it was in Jerusalem that Isaiah did his great work.

In several ways he was different from the prophets who went before him. He came of an aristocratic family, and had not to force his way to the circle round the king. Most eloquent of speech and gifted in mind, there was a stateliness about his bearing which proclaimed him a cultivated man. But he possessed also the most practical gifts. He laboured without ceasing for at least forty years, patiently at work to impress the great truths God had taught him on court and people alike.

He soon formed a circle of disciples, and from time to time issued collections of his prophecies. It appears that sometimes he fixed in public places placards containing some brief message, for at that time even workmen in Jerusalem could read and write. He at last overcame opposition, and became by far the most influential statesman in the land. He not only warned, but succeeded at times in guiding, the nation in the difficult cross-seas of the politics of his day. He was most

of all remarkable for saying clearly what previous prophets had only dimly seen and imperfectly declared concerning God's will and character.

Let us try to understand the condition of the kingdom of Judah when he entered upon his work. The land had enjoyed great prosperity under King Uzziah, just as had the northern nation under Jeroboam II. Partly through a long-continued peace with the rulers of Israel, Edom had been reconquered ; Jewish ships sailed up and down the Red Sea as in the days of Solomon ; trade flourished greatly, and there did not appear to be a cloud on the horizon. But the nation did not grow wiser or better as it grew richer. Most of the wealth was in the hands of the nobles and grandees, who crushed the workers and ground the face of the poor. The rich grew much richer and the poor much poorer, and money was wasted in all manner of luxury, indulgence, and sin.

Isaiah gives a wonderful picture of the fine ladies of Jerusalem as he watched them in the streets and at the court festivities of the capital, 'walking and mincing as they go, and making a tinkling with their feet.' He tells us of 'the

bravery of their anklets, and the network ornaments for their hair, and the crescents ; the pendants, and the bracelets, and the mufflers ; the head-tires, and the ankle chains, and the sashes, and the perfume boxes, and the amulets ; the rings and the nose jewels ; the festival robes, and the mantles, and the shawls, and the purses ; the hand mirrors, and the fine linen, and the turbans, and the veils.'

Amos, the rough herdsman, had spoken of the ladies of Samaria as 'kine of Bashan,' trampling down all the humble people, as wild cattle, when eager for food, trample the flowers and humble creatures of the fields. Isaiah uses a finer scorn and a more piercing satire when he makes an inventory of the ornaments of the court beauties, many of whom he knew so well.

Worst of all, the land was full of idols, though the sacrifices to the Lord were still offered. No one knew quite what he believed, or, indeed, greatly cared, and superstition flourished. Magicians, diviners, and ventriloquists who professed to control spirits who could speak, all did a roaring trade. And, alas ! everyone seemed content that it should be so.

To such city folk, luxurious, self-complacent, idolatrous, Isaiah brought his opening message. He alone saw clearly that God's judgment was at hand. If no other could read the signs of the times, he knew full well what that dark cloud in the northern sky meant. Assyria would not be sated with the conquest of Syria or of Israel, but would press on to Judah. Assyria was to be the instrument of God's anger on these selfish and lazy citizens.

Here is the prophet's terrible description of the invaders: 'Behold, they shall come with speed swiftly ; none shall be weary nor stumble among them ; none shall slumber or sleep ; neither shall their girdle be loosed nor the latchet of their shoes broken ; whose arrows are sharp and all their bows bent ; their horses' hoofs are like the flint and their wheels like a whirlwind ; their roaring shall be like a lion, they shall roar like a young lion ; yea, they shall roar, and lay hold of the prey and carry it away safe, and there shall be none to deliver.'

In that day of disaster the Lord alone would be exalted. Men would cast away their idols of silver and their idols of gold ; they would cast

them to the moles and the bats. Women would lose their beauty and look like old hags. The warriors should be slain, and lamentation and mourning fill the land.

I do not think that the people of Jerusalem were as bad as the people of Samaria, and they were in all likelihood better than the surrounding nations. But Isaiah declared that more was expected from them than from the others, and quite justly. After all these centuries of God's care and teaching, they must not think they did well if no worse than their neighbours. This was the parable he told his hearers to make them understand. The exquisite poetry of it caught their ears, and they could not but go on listening to the words of condemnation with which it closed. It began as a love-song and ended as a dirge.

‘Let me sing for my well-beloved a song of my beloved touching his vineyard. My well-beloved had a vineyard in a very fruitful hill: and he made a trench about it, and gathered out the stones thereof, and planted it with the choicest vine, and built a tower in the midst of it, and also hewed out a winepress therein: and he looked

that it should bring forth grapes, and behold, it brought forth *wild* grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge, I pray you, betwixt me and my vineyard. What could have been done more to my vineyard that I have not done in it? Wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes? And now go to ; I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard : I will take away the hedge thereof, and it shall be eaten up ; I will break down the fence thereof, and it shall be trodden down ; and I will lay it waste : it shall not be pruned nor hoed ; but there shall come up briars and thorns ; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his pleasant plant: and He looked for mercy, and behold oppression ; for righteousness, but behold a cry.'

With such words of haunting beauty and thunderous anger, Isaiah stepped on to the crowded stage of Jerusalem, where he was to play his part so nobly and so long. Do you ask what had enabled him to see what others saw not, and to dare to attack the sins of the

nation with such assurance and determination ? Happily we may know, for Isaiah has told us himself the great experience which helped to make him what he was. But when you hear of the vision which God granted to him, you must not think that this was the beginning of his devotion to the will of God. It was only the call which God sent to him, and which crystallized into definite purpose the thoughts and desires which had been in his mind so long.

He saw himself in the Palace of God, which was like the Temple on earth, but also different. An altar was there with the live coals upon it, but there was no ark. In its place stood the throne, high and lifted up, and seated thereon none other than the Lord Himself; and the skirts of His robe of majesty filled the Temple. There were attendants, but these were not priests, nor, indeed, human beings. They were seraphim, angels as bright and as swift as the lightning-flash. Each had six wings, two to cover the feet and two to cover the face, in token of their deep reverence, and two wherewith to fly. They were chanting one to another, and saying : ' Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts ; the whole earth is

full of His glory.' The foundations of the threshold trembled at these voices, and the Palace was filled with smoke as if a thousand censers had been lit.

In that moment Isaiah felt that any goodness which he had thought to be in him was as nothing in this holy place among the holy seraphim and before the All-holy One. He cried out in despair: 'Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts.'

Then one of the seraphim flew to him with a live coal from off the altar, and touched his mouth with it, and said: 'Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin is purged.'

Immediately Isaiah felt himself changed. The sickening burden of shame and uncleanness was lifted from him. He understood that what he could not do for himself God had done for him. Water and fire were the two elements used for cleansing, and of these fire was the most powerful. The touch of holy fire on his lips he understood to be a sign that God had burned away his

unworthiness and made him fit to stand in His presence.

Now he heard a voice saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ This great King sought a messenger. At once Isaiah felt that he was now fit to do the behests of even the Lord of Hosts, and cried out, ‘Here am I, send me.’ And the Lord answered: ‘Go and tell this people, “Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not.” Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn again, and be healed.’

This sounds to you a cruel command. But if you understand it, you will see that it is really the voice of wounded love which knows only too well that the people will not listen and will not be warned. Every time that we hear God’s message it makes us better or worse. If we listen and reject it, we find it more difficult to hear and understand next time. The punishment for not obeying your conscience is loss of power to understand the voice of conscience. Even a schoolboy who has once ceased to pay attention

soon forms the habit of hearing merely the sound of a voice without understanding the sense. God knew that the people to whom He sent Isaiah would not listen to him with their hearts, though his words would enter their ears, so He said, as it were : 'This is your work, to make these people worse, not better ; more slow to obey, not more quick ; less obedient, not more obedient.' But that was not what God *wanted* to happen. If only the people would have hearkened and repented, what joy in heaven !

Do not say : 'Then it was unkind to warn them if the warning would only make them worse.' We *must* warn people who are in danger. We dare not fail to warn them. The use to be made of the warning lies with them.

When Isaiah heard what his sad work was to be, he did not flinch, but only asked, 'Lord, how long ?' and the sombre answer came : 'Until cities be waste without inhabitant, and houses without men, and the land become utterly waste, and the Lord have removed men far away, and the forsaken places be many in the midst of the land.' So the prophet learned that until the conqueror laid waste the land he must continue his diffi-

cult task of warning people who would not be warned.

But before the voice of the Lord ceased one great encouragement was given. Isaiah was told that though his nation would be like an oak-tree cut to the ground, the stump would not rot and die, but would bud and grow again. This was a promise that there would be a few in Israel who would listen to God's message and obey. For these God would care, and the promises of mercy and glory would be fulfilled for them.

This was the vision which set Isaiah apart to begin his work. From it he learned three things: first, to think of God as the utterly Holy One. Amos had taught His universal justice; Hosea had revealed His love. Isaiah declared His holiness, which is universal justice and love and much more. His favourite title for God is 'the Holy One of Israel.' Second, he was taught that the whole earth was the Lord's; that while the Jews were His chosen race, He ruled all nations. Lastly, that while the nation as a whole would refuse God's message, a certain number would listen, and that this remnant would inherit the promises made to David and his people. Amos

had dimly seen this truth. To Isaiah there was nothing more clear or certain.

The prophet was so impressed with this last assurance that when his eldest son was born he called him Shear-jashub, which means in Hebrew 'A remnant shall remain.' When this child was a few years old Ahaz, the grandson of Uzziah, was on the throne. He was a weak and foolish king, and did nothing to right the wrong-doing in his kingdom. He and his nobles lived the same luxurious and unheeding life, and gave no thought to the prophet's upbraiding. Suddenly they were alarmed by rumours that they were to be attacked. 'Syria is confederate with Ephraim' was the news which flashed through Jerusalem and made the palace-dwellers grow pale. When the prophet described later what had happened he wrote: 'The king's heart was moved, and the heart of his people, as the trees of the forest are moved with the wind.'

The rumour was true. Pekah, son of Remaliah, the last but one of the kings of Israel, and Rezin, the king of Syria, had determined to conquer Jerusalem, destroy the royal family, and set a new king on the throne. Ahaz and his advisers were

at their wits' end, and at once lost their heads. The only plan the king could devise for their safety was to entreat the great king of Assyria, whose vassals Pekah and Rezin were, to assist him. The heavy price he would have to pay was to become himself a vassal of the same mighty war-lord.

This was double folly. It was not to be supposed that the Assyrians would allow kings subject to their rule to make war on their own account, and therefore the help of Assyria could be counted on without paying for it ; and besides, to invite Assyria's aid was like asking a lion to deliver one from two wolves. The price demanded by the lion would be sure to be greater than the combined thievings of the wolves.

Isaiah saw all this with perfect clearness. He knew that Israel and Syria, being in the grip of Assyria, were not to be feared even from a political point of view. Besides, their avowed purpose was to destroy the kingdom and to set up another, and Isaiah's faith in God's promise to protect the faithful remnant would not let him believe that this could be. The prophet alone

remained unshaken and confident in this hour of national danger.

At God's command he went forth with Shear-jashub his son to meet Ahaz, and said to him: 'Take heed, and be quiet; fear not, neither let thine heart be faint, because of these two ends of smoking firebrands, for the fierce anger of Syria and Rezin, and of the son of Remaliah.' By these contemptuous words for the two enemies of Judah he sought to put heart into the cowardly king, and dissuade him from putting his head into the lion's mouth. To be sure, he had said that Assyria would devastate the land, but every year of delay was clear gain for the country and for his own work of gathering disciples. 'If ye will not believe,' added he, 'ye shall not be established.' His son, whose name was proof of the prophet's perfect confidence, stood by his side like a living sign.

But the king, half mad with fear, would neither listen to words nor be convinced by signs. Longing to convince him, Isaiah sought him out a second time, and urged him to demand a sign from heaven in token that he spoke truly. Upon this Ahaz all at once developed a most tender

conscience, and answered: 'I will not ask, neither will I tempt the Lord.' He cloaked his panic-stricken obstinacy by a pretence of religious feeling.

Then Isaiah, tired of his weakness and insincerity, cried out scornfully: 'Hear ye now, O house of David, is it a small thing for you to weary men, that ye will weary my God also?' If the king would not choose a sign, yet a sign was to be given. Isaiah foretold that to a woman in Jerusalem a son should be born whose name would be called Immanuel, 'God with us.' He went on to say that before the child was old enough to know good from evil, the land of Rezin and, Pekah should be desolate, and that Judah, too, because of the folly of Ahaz, should be ravaged.

Isaiah afterwards took this name Immanuel, as a kind of watchword, and St. Matthew tells us that when Jesus was born this prophecy was perfectly fulfilled, for He truly was Immanuel, 'God with us.'

Since the king would not be convinced, the prophet could only take precautions.

He appealed to the people, and he did it in this public way. On a great tablet he wrote in

common characters, so that all could read it, the word Maher-shalal-hash-baz, which means ‘The spoil speedeth, the prey hasteth’—that is to say, the day of plunder is near. When a child was born to him a little while later he gave him this curious name, and wrote down that before the child had learned to say ‘my father’ or ‘my mother,’ Syria and Israel would be despoiled. He added other warnings to this, and bound up the roll in which they were written and sealed it in the presence of Uriah the priest and one other well-known man. He then committed it to the hands of his disciples to be kept till the day when his words should be proved true. ‘I will wait for the Lord,’ he said, ‘that hideth His face from the house of Jacob. Behold, I and the children whom the Lord hath given me are for signs and for wonders in Israel from the Lord of Hosts, which dwelleth in Mount Zion.’

Well might Isaiah turn from King Ahaz in disgust. The king went a little later to Damascus to do homage to the Assyrian monarch, and to deliver the heavy tribute which emptied his treasury. There the thing which interested him most was an altar of a pattern new to him, and

upon his return he busied himself in ordering a new altar of the same kind in Jerusalem. He could not hear the distant tread of the armed hosts who were to overrun his land : he made no preparation for the threatening future. Like a lady poring over a fashion-plate in a burning house, he was absorbed in his new style of altar while dangers crowded thick around his kingdom.

But Isaiah had visions of a true King. He looked, beyond the disasters coming ever nearer, to a new kingdom, and painted a picture which will never fade of the God-given ruler of it.

A day of joy and peace would come, he declared, when all the broken armour of the battle-field and the garments rolled in blood would be burned up, and the gloom and darkness enshrouding the nations would be for ever driven away. The yoke of the conqueror and the rod of the oppressor would be finally broken. And all this would be brought about by a wonderful King, scarcely to be distinguished from God Himself. As he thought of it he broke into this famous prophecy : 'For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given ; and the government shall be upon His shoulder, and His name shall be called Wonderful,



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Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and of peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with judgment and with righteousness from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the Lord of Hosts shall perform this.'

I think Isaiah expected this blessed day to arrive soon. It was really far off, for it was the day of Jesus Christ of which he spoke. This is the first clear prophecy of the coming of our Lord. How brightly the light in the prophet's lantern was shining now !

CHAPTER XVII

ISAIAH, THE VICTORIOUS PROPHET

ISAIAH XII, XX, XXII, XXVIII, XXXI, XXXVI—XXXVIII.

By the time that Isaiah's second son, with the long, curious name Maher-shalal-hash-baz, was old enough to speak, the greater part of his prophecy had been fulfilled. Damascus, the capital of Syria, had been conquered by Assyria and the land of Israel overrun. But the city of Samaria was not attacked at that time, as he had expected, for Pekah, the king of Israel, had been slain, and Hoshea, who succeeded him, immediately submitted to the great Assyrian king, and became his humble vassal. So it happened that Isaiah's words were not completely fulfilled. But he did not lose his influence as a prophet on this account, for both the king and the people of Judah saw that the situation had changed, and they understood that in speaking of the future the prophets

did not mean that every detail of their picture would come true, but only the main outlines.

Isaiah was like a man on a masthead seeing a mountain afar off which those on deck could not see. The sailor on the look-out cries, 'I see land thirty miles away.' Later, when the ship has come nearer, they all see the mountain for themselves. If they discover it to have been fifty miles away instead of thirty, they do not therefore call the look-out man a deceiver, for the most important fact has been proved true, and the only error is that of distance. In the same way Isaiah was not discredited because Samaria did not fall at that precise time, for the chief events he had foretold soon came to pass. Both Rezin and Pekah, whose threats had frightened King Ahaz into seeking the protection of Assyria, were shown to be but smouldering firebrands, quickly stamped out.

But the nobles of Judah did not change. They were as careless as ever, and even more reckless. They had always taken wine too freely, but now they became hard drinkers, and gave themselves up to drunken revels night after night. At last, when about ten years had passed, the prophet

saw that the final fall of Samaria was at hand, and he sought by describing its terrible fate to rouse his own fellow-countrymen.

Appearing at one of their drinking bouts, he began to tell them of the fate about to overtake the drunkards of Samaria, whom Amos had attacked half a century earlier for their foolish trust in their security, 'lolling upon their couches and gulping wine out of basins.' Isaiah said that Samaria, the crown of the pride of the drunkards of Ephraim, would be trodden under foot. The luxurious city lying at the head of its beautiful valley was like a flower quickly fading. Just as a man gathers the first ripe fig and eats it quickly, Samaria would be consumed by her enemies.

Then he turned on his hearers, and told them that they also were dazed and stupid through strong drink; even the priest and the prophet had erred through wine. He told them that their city was like a room in which people had been drinking for hours—the air foul and the furniture filthy. But now these men, half drunk as they were, began to jeer at him, and to say that he kept repeating the same things over and over as though he were teaching school-children. 'It is

precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little and there a little.' The Hebrew words are very short, single syllables such as little children would learn when beginning to talk or do simple lessons. Here they are, so that you can read them for yourselves: 'Ki tsav la-tsav, tsav la-tsav, qav la qav, qav la-qav, z'air sham z'air sham.' These words they said over mockingly, as if they were at school and Isaiah their schoolmaster.

Isaiah knew well how to answer them. He took up the words of the drunken chorus and used them with terrible effect, saying: 'The word of the Lord shall be unto them precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little and there a little; that they may go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken.' He meant that by stroke upon stroke, blow upon blow, loss upon loss, failure upon failure, God would teach the people of Judah to know the truth concerning Himself and righteousness.

And so it came to be. For many years before the final fall the story of the kingdom was one long drawn-out agony. City after city was destroyed; treasury and temple and palace successively were

stripped bare, the very gold and bronze which had overlaid the doors was cut off; three times at least crowds of the inhabitants were swept away into captivity; until, finally, Jerusalem, left alone among the cities and half emptied of her citizens, fell before Nebuchadrezzar in the days of Jeremiah, the weeping prophet.

But Isaiah had more important work to do than to rebuke the drunken fools who gibed at his teaching. After the fall of Samaria the king of Assyria was kept so busy for ten years in arranging the affairs of his kingdom that, although Judah still belonged to him nominally, he left the Jews very much alone. Now there was a political party in Jerusalem which eagerly desired to rebel against Assyria, for they thought it would be far better to ally themselves with Egypt, Assyria's greatest enemy, and with their neighbours, the Philistines. For a long time they plotted, even sending an embassy to Egypt in secret, for they feared Isaiah, knowing that he would oppose them.

At last the plan came to light. Isaiah at once attacked such foolish policy. Prophecy after prophecy he poured forth, declaring the coming

fate of the nations which broke faith with Assyria. He directed his words in particular against Philistia and Egypt. 'Woe to them,' he said, 'that go down to Egypt for help, and stay on horses ; and trust in chariots because they are many, and in horsemen because they are very strong ; but they look not unto the Holy One of Israel, neither seek the Lord. Now the Egyptians are men, and not God ; and their horses flesh, and not spirit ; and when the Lord shall stretch out His hand, both he that helpeth shall stumble, and he that is holpen shall fall, and they all shall fail together.'

With such warnings Isaiah succeeded in influencing Hezekiah, the son of Ahaz, who was now upon the throne, to delay action. Hezekiah was a good man, who desired to please God, but as a governor he was weak, and it needed constant effort on Isaiah's part to prevent him from making some fatal mistake. When it came to the ears of the Assyrian king that the Philistines and Egyptians were plotting against his power, he sent his commander-in-chief at the head of an army to attack the cities of Philistia.

This was the moment at which Hezekiah was

hard pressed, by those who desired rebellion, to join with the rebels. Isaiah took an almost desperate step to warn the king of the folly of such an act.

He, the aristocrat, the statesman, one of the best known men in Jerusalem, appeared one day naked and barefoot in the streets, just like an Indian fakir of to-day. No one could think him mad, for he walked with as much dignity, and spoke as calmly, as before. Already for years he had worn sackcloth, the roughest, poorest stuff used by mourners, in token of the calamities to visit the city. Now he went stripped and bare. The people soon understood the meaning of this strange action. As he went naked and unshod, so the captives from Egypt and Philistia would go shamed and unclad into exile. For three years he thus walked the streets of Jerusalem, making his very body, as it were, a placard prophesying the defeat of Assyria. He succeeded in his aim. The king held back from rebellion, and though Ashdod, the great Philistine city, was conquered and the land ravaged, Judah escaped.

Isaiah was thus victorious over those politicians who sought earthly aid only, and had no faith in the help of God. He had communicated some-

thing of his own faith to the king. The burden of his message was constantly this: 'Keep free from all alliances with men. Trust in God to help you. In quietness and confidence shall be your strength.' It was the wisest advice a politician could give, but Isaiah could not have given it unless he had believed with an unconquerable faith that God was the controller of all the nations, and the only deliverer from such a robber empire as Assyria.

The time came, however, when Hezekiah was tempted to throw over Isaiah and to give himself into the hands of those of his court who wished for an alliance with Egypt. This was because of the death of Sargon, the king of Assyria. Rumour said that his successor, Sennacherib, was very insecure upon the throne; to all the little nations conquered by Assyria this seemed a splendid opportunity for gaining their freedom.

So strong was this feeling that Isaiah was powerless to oppose it, and Judah joined with her neighbours against Assyria.

But the prophet was not silent. He thundered his warnings against this policy as an act of unbelief in God, and in particular he condemned

Shebna, the king's treasurer, who was the leader of this party. By God's command Isaiah sought him out, and spoke scathing words of punishment to come. 'What doest thou here? and whom hast thou here, that thou hast hewed thee out here a sepulchre? hewing him out a sepulchre on high, graving an habitation for himself in the rock! Behold, the Lord will haul thee away violently, O thou strong man; He will surely turn and toss thee like a ball into a large country; there shalt thou die, and there shall be the chariots of thy glory, thou shame of the Lord's house.' In this fashion Isaiah foretold Shebna's loss of power and of court favour. He even went so far as to name as the treasurer's successor Eliakim, the son of Hilkiah, one of his own disciples, and a man of humble trust in God.

Isaiah had not long to wait before he was proved wholly in the right. In two years' time Sennacherib was firmly established on his throne, and set forth to visit the rebellious nations with terrible punishments. Like a destroying flood he swept over the kingdom of Judah, and from every hill and valley rose the smoke of conquered cities. From a monument erected by Sennacherib him-

self we learn that 200,000 captives were taken from Judah alone. Panic seized Jerusalem. The people had persuaded themselves that the Assyrians would never visit their land again, yet here they were at their very gates.

The prophet describes the hasty preparations that were made. Houses were broken down to fill up the breaches in the wall. A new reservoir was made, for the water formerly gathered in a pool much exposed to the enemy's attacks. Many of the nobles fled, and others in reckless despair gave themselves to wild revelry, crying: 'Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die.' Shebna and his party lost their influence at a stroke, and Isaiah was called back to be the king's chief adviser.

If this was a great triumph for Isaiah, a yet greater was in store. In that moment of desperate anxiety he proclaimed that Jerusalem should be kept safe. It seemed to him impossible that the believing remnant of the people could be kept safe and unhurt if the city fell, and therefore he was convinced that God could not intend destruction. To him the enemy was but a tool in God's hand, and could do only what He chose.

Isaiah saw the day approaching when Assyria, having conquered every land and city save Jerusalem, would fight against God Himself. There could be but one issue to that conflict. Assyria, the conqueror, would be defeated, and then all people would worship God, the Almighty King.

The prophet's faith carried him in eagle vision over the whole of the known world, and he beheld all the nations coming to worship the Lord, the Conqueror of the strongest of them all. These are his wonderful words: 'Israel shall be third with Egypt and Assyria, even a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of Hosts shall bless, saying: "Blessed be Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel Mine inheritance."'

Think what this meant. It is as if in Thibet a prophet of a religion unknown to civilized nations were to appear to-day and declare that England and Russia, these two mighty world-powers, would meet in deadly conflict, and the victor, with however great an army, would be hurled back from the mountain fastnesses of Lhassa; and that finally the religion of that little land would spread afar over England's world-wide

empire and Russia's thousands of leagues of territory.

Yet the wonderful thing is that Isaiah's prophecy has come true, though not as he expected. It was long, long after the day of Sennacherib's failure that the God of Isaiah became known across the whole wide earth. The great nations which own Him do not bear the names of Assyria and Egypt. Yet his faith was justified. For in God's own time this very book of Isaiah has come to be read and loved by hundreds of millions, in a thousand far-spread lands, and in hundreds of languages.

But to go back to Jerusalem. Though Hezekiah had prepared the city for a siege, he escaped for the moment. Collecting all the treasures he could, he sent an embassy to Sennacherib begging forgiveness. The Assyrian knew Hezekiah to be a weak king, and believed him sufficiently cowed to be trusted. Besides, there were a few stubborn cities to the south of the kingdom to be conquered. His troops were withdrawn from the neighbourhood of Jerusalem, and king and people breathed again.

About this time Hezekiah fell sick of a very

serious illness, which, perhaps, was brought on by the anxiety of the past months.

Then came Isaiah bearing a message from God : ‘Set thine house in order: for thou shalt die, and not live.’ When Hezekiah heard his death sentence he spoke not a word, but turned his face to the wall and prayed to God, saying: ‘Remember now, I pray Thee, how I have walked before Thee in truth, and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in Thy sight.’ It was a piteous prayer, self-righteous, perhaps, but wholly trustful. Hezekiah had had a very difficult task, and he had kept close to God according to his light, and now he was to die an untimely death. He did not ask in so many words to be restored to life and health, but his tears spoke for him, for he wept sore.

Then the word of God came to Isaiah again, bringing him a welcome message : ‘Go, say to Hezekiah, Thus saith the Lord, the God of David, thy father, “I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears ; behold, I will add unto thy days fifteen years, and I will deliver thee and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and I will defend this city !”’ Then God gave him a

sign. On the sundial which Ahaz his father had erected, the shadow was to go backward ten degrees. Before leaving him Isaiah ordered a plaster of figs to be laid on the carbuncle from which Hezekiah was suffering, and by this means the king was healed.

It was not usual for God to give signs to encourage the faith of those He specially blessed. The men who stood nearest God and loved Him best did not need such signs. But it was a great crisis for Hezekiah and for the nation. He could only live if his faith were strengthened that he would recover ; and the nation could only endure if their king were full of trust. So God used this way of encouraging Hezekiah that he might grow strong in body and in spirit.

His faith was soon put to the test. Sennacherib quickly began to repent of leaving such a powerful fortress as Jerusalem still standing in his rear. There were rumours of fresh attacks from the south, and this made him the more uneasy. He therefore detached a strong force under one of his generals, whose title was ' Rabshakeh,' to secure the surrender of the city.

When the Rabshakeh appeared before the

walls he was met by a humble little embassy, at the head of which was Eliakim, Isaiah's friend, and now treasurer and chief of the household. The Assyrian, being far from sure that his troops were sufficient to ensure conquest, exerted every effort to frighten the king. He began in a loud hectoring voice: 'Say ye now to Hezekiah, Thus saith the great king, the king of Assyria, "What confidence is this wherein thou trustest? I say thy counsel and strength for the war are but vain words; now on whom dost thou trust that thou hast rebelled against me?"' Then he proceeded to say that Egypt was like a bruised reed which would pierce the hand of the man who leaned on it. And what confidence had they in their God? Had not King Hezekiah taken away His high places and His altars throughout Judah? Besides, it was at the bidding of the Lord Himself that his own master had commanded him to go up against Judah and destroy it.

You see, the Rabshakeh had heard how Hezekiah had set about reforming the worship of his people, destroying all the places where God was worshipped impurely. He may also have known

something of Isaiah's prophecy that Assyria was God's chosen instrument, and glibly tells the lie that the Assyrian king had had a message from God Himself. He took care that everything he said should reach the ears of the people on the wall, with the intention of spreading panic through the city.

Eliakim and his companions begged him to use the Syrian language, which they could perfectly understand, but the Rabshakeh's only response was to break into loud abuse, and to shout threats to the people. 'Beware,' he cried, 'lest Hezekiah persuade you, saying, "The Lord will deliver us." Hath any of the gods of the nations delivered his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? and have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? Who are they among all the gods of those countries, that have delivered their country out of my hand, that the Lord should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand?'

The people remained absolutely silent, for the king had given strict orders, 'Answer him not,' but these taunts entered their hearts and made

them tremble. It was a very crestfallen and miserable little group that returned to Hezekiah to tell him all the words of the Rabshakeh.

Hezekiah sent on the messengers in the garb of mourners to the prophet Isaiah with this message : ‘It may be that the Lord thy God will hear the word of Rabshakeh, whom the king of Assyria his master hath sent to reproach the living God, and will rebuke the words which the Lord thy God hath heard : wherefore lift up thy prayer for the remnant that is left.’ Then, having rent his garments and covered himself with sackcloth, he went into the Temple to pray.

The answer Isaiah committed to the messengers was calm and confident as ever : ‘Thus shall ye say to your master, Thus saith the Lord, “Be not afraid of the words that thou hast heard, wherewith the servants of the king of Assyria have blasphemed Me. Behold, I will put a spirit in him, and he shall hear a rumour, and shall return to his own land ; and I will cause him to fall by the sword in his own land.”’

His confidence was quickly justified. The Rabshakeh dared not lay siege unless reinforced, and returned to Sennacherib, to find his master

threatened by the king of Ethiopia and unable to spare his army for the attack. For the moment the Assyrian king contented himself with sending a letter to Hezekiah, saying: ‘Let not thy God, in Whom thou trustest, deceive thee, saying, “Jerusalem shall not be given into the hand of Assyria.”’ The letter ended with a long list of the kings and the gods whom he had vanquished.

Hezekiah was still on the rack. He could only give himself yet more earnestly to prayer. Spreading out the threatening letter before God, he besought Him to have pity and to save. ‘Incline Thine ear, O Lord, and hear,’ he cried; ‘open Thine eyes, O Lord, and see, and hear all the words of Sennacherib, who hath sent to reproach the living God.’

The king had not long to wait for an answer. Isaiah was inspired to send a message to him. I think he must have had it written, and was keeping it until he knew it should be sent. In majestic words he described the arrogance of Assyria, who had reproached and blasphemed God, thinking that by its own power it had conquered, when really it had only been by permission of God that the victories had been won. But the

time had come for this brutal nation to be checked. It would be turned back. These were the words of the Lord : ‘ I know thy sitting down, and thy going out and coming in, and thy raging against Me. Because of thy raging against Me, and for that thine arrogancy is come up into Mine ears, therefore will I put My hook in thy nose and My bridle in thy lips, and I will turn thee back by the way thou camest.’ This fierce people would be treated like a wild beast, and dragged back by hook and bridle to its lair.

The prophet went on to declare that prosperity should return upon Jerusalem ; the people cooped up in the city would be able to go out to their vineyards and fields again ; the remnant of Judah left by the enemy would be like a plant half rooted up, but now planted again and taking root downwards and bearing fruit upwards. Carefully the promise was repeated : ‘ The king of Assyria shall not come into this city, nor shoot an arrow there, neither shall he come before it with shield, nor cast a mount against it. By the way that he came, by the same shall he return.’

Without amazing faith Isaiah could never have sent such a message. It was as really a challenge

to the unbelieving as when Elijah proposed the trial by fire to the priests of Baal.

And as God showed Himself faithful to Elijah, so also He showed Himself to Isaiah. Sennacherib's great army never came near Jerusalem. From inscriptions on his own monuments we know that he returned to his own land without attacking it. In an Egyptian narrative, repeated by the Greek historian Herodotus, we learn that a great disaster befell his army. Isaiah tells us that a terrible pestilence attacked the camp. God's promise was kept to the full. His prophet was proved the wisest statesman of them all, because he studied politics with the eye of a man of faith.

Other prophets were as great as Isaiah, but none during their lifetime gained such a victory as this. After forty years of hard work he had won the king and the best of the nation to a living faith in God. He used his immense influence wisely. Hezekiah, who had already begun to attack the idolatrous worship he had long refused to share, now cleansed his land from end to end, and sought to make it God's land in truth as well as in name.

But Isaiah had done still greater service in a way not so easily seen. He had formed a band of disciples, stalwarts of faith, who not only did what he commanded, but had understood his thoughts. Their religion was more than national religion. They were the beginning of the Church within the nation, which could exist though the nation were uprooted. When the day came, a century later, that even Jerusalem fell, the descendants of these disciples of Isaiah had learned to keep the faith, though the Temple lay in ruins. They handed on to the world the truths of God on which our Christian religion rests.

We can well imagine Isaiah, in the happy evening of his days, singing these beautiful songs of faith and joy, which stud his book like white water-lilies in the dark pool; such a one as this: 'Behold, God is my salvation: I will trust and not be afraid, for the Lord Jehovah is my strength and song, and He is become my salvation. Therefore with joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation. And in that day ye shall say, "Give thanks unto the Lord, call upon His name, declare His doings among the peoples, make

mention that His name is exalted. Sing unto the Lord, for He hath done excellent things. Let this be known in all the earth. Cry aloud and shout, thou inhabitant of Zion, for great is the Holy One in the midst of thee.”

CHAPTER XVIII

MICAH, THE PROPHET OF THE COUNTRY PLACES

MICAH I—VII

ISAIAH was not left without a helper in his prophetic work. Just about the middle of his career, when Samaria fell before the Assyrians, a young peasant called Micah began to speak in the name of the Lord in the country places to the south-west of Jerusalem.

Between the wheat-fields of the plain by the sea and the lofty tableland forming the central district of Judah, there is a belt of hill-country. Here, where streams abound and the soil is fertile, and blossoms and fruit are plentiful in their season, Micah was born and lived. It was a very different landscape from the bare and inhospitable eastern slope where Amos kept his stunted sheep, just twenty miles away, very different, too, from the

sights so familiar to the eyes of Isaiah, who all his life was a dweller in Jerusalem. Micah was a villager, and lived among country folk. Jerusalem seemed just as remote to many of his neighbours as London is to Sussex farm-labourers to-day, a place often heard of, but rarely seen.

We do not know whether Isaiah and Micah ever met and talked together. There is, however, one great prophecy which is found in both their books, and it is tempting to think that this was the fruit of some meeting for speech and prayer when God gave the same message to both. If they did meet, they must have presented a strange contrast: Isaiah the accomplished courtier, the great statesman, the eloquent writer; Micah the shy peasant farmer, without knowledge of city life, blunt and inexperienced in speech. Imagine Robert Burns, fresh from his Ayrshire plough, meeting, say, Sir Walter Scott, familiar with the best society of mind and birth in Edinburgh. Then you can understand better the difference between Micah and Isaiah.

They were both doing the same work, but Micah was a son of the soil, and spoke for the labouring folk as Isaiah could not. Though less

skilled in tongue and less trained in mind, he could say some things which badly needed saying more strongly than the city prophet, and he matches him in his splendid promise of forgiveness. Isaiah said : ““ Come now, and let us reason together,” saith the Lord : “ though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow ; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”” Micah gave a promise quite as overwhelming in its fulness : ‘Thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.’

Though Micah lived out of sight and sound of famous Jerusalem, he was not out of reach of the sayings and doings of the great world. Moresheth-gath, the little town from which he took his name, ‘Micah the Morasthite,’ lay on the ledge of a hill not quite 1,000 feet above the sea, close to the pass by which the road went up from the plain to the central tableland. There were many passers-by within hail, and much of the business between the rich Philistine cities and the capital of Judah went up and down this road.

In the plain, at the foot of the hills, lay the highway to Egypt, coming straight down from the north. That was the way taken by the

armies of Assyria. In those troubled years Micah must often have seen the cloud of dust and heard the clash of arms which proclaimed the passing by of regiments of soldiers. In the very year in which he spoke his chief prophecy, the vast army of Sargon, the king of Assyria, marched down the great highway to fight and conquer the Egyptians at Raphia. How he must have watched the long lines of infantry, the companies of rolling chariots, the clouds of horsemen, the multitudes of baggage animals—would the great procession never end? It was hard, hard for him to believe that the God of his little nation was also the God of this mighty people, or that his nation was of more importance to the world than this robber empire. But he did believe it with all his strength. Otherwise I think his heart would have broken.

For there was much to sadden a thoughtful, kindly man as he looked out on the countryside just then. Once upon a time every man had his own piece of land, and, though he worked hard, managed to live in simple comfort. Did he lose his health or have a bad season, the neighbours stood by him and his debt did not crush him.

Now all this was changed. Rich men were hungry for land. Debtors had no mercy shown to them. They were forced to sell their few acres and go forth landless and homeless to live a life little better than a slave's. If there were any dispute, the rich man always won, for no judge could be trusted not to take a bribe. And it was almost impossible for a poor man to keep his land, for the taxes for the tribute to Assyria were so heavy, and the poorest paid most heavily. If he went to buy, he was sure to be cheated by a scant measure or false weights or some other trick equally mean.

Sometimes it seemed to Micah as if the poor, in the hands of the cruel rich and the unjust rulers, were just like a bullock in the hands of a butcher. First he flays off the skin, and then he cuts the flesh from the bones, and then breaks the bones to get at the marrow, and last of all chops up the pieces and boils them in a caldron until he has extracted every drop of nourishment. Just so the last coin, the last possession, the last and dearest treasure, was taken from the humble peasant. And for what purpose? To build grander houses in Jerusalem, that the rich might

continue in riot and luxury. Sometimes as he looked at the dull, thin faces of the overworked and underfed labourers, it seemed to him as though the very blood of their bodies had been taken to mingle with the lime used in building.

And the bitterest thing of all was to hear some of the prophets, who fed at the tables of such men, declaring that everything was right. He pronounced such prophets to be like dogs who would bite you at the moment of pretending to give a peaceful welcome. They were mere hirings, ready to do anyone mischief who would not stop their mouths with dainties.

Often Micah's blood had boiled within him as he saw all this wrong-doing and cant and misery. Now the time had come when he felt he must speak. The news of the fall of Samaria and the visible progress of Sargon's army towards Egypt made him sure that punishment was coming upon Judah. No radiant vision came to him as to Isaiah ; no sudden voice among the humming of the bees on the flower-strewn hillside. None the less, he felt himself clearly called to declare God's judgment. And soon people began to gather to hear him. At markets, or in the busy gateways

of the little towns, or by the road to Jerusalem, he spoke God's mind about the land-greedy, the covetous, and the cruel.

But whether he spoke to few or many, to rich or poor, there was one mark of his preaching which compelled people to listen. There was a strange majesty about it. He always spoke as if to far-spreading multitudes, and as though great presences were about him. This is how he began one of his addresses : 'Hear, ye peoples, all of you ; hearken, O earth, and all that therein is : and let the Lord God be witness against you, the Lord from His holy temple.' Another time he cried : 'Hear ye now what the Lord saith : "Arise, contend thou before the mountains, and let the hills hear thy voice."'

Was it not wonderful that this ploughman prophet should be so filled with God's spirit as to be convinced that the whole world ought to listen to him, and one day would ? He was attacking the petty tyrants of the village and countryside, but he knew this to be a great matter, for he had to declare God's mind about right and wrong. To-day his voice has reached the millions he felt himself to be addressing, and

to-day we realize that those things which seemed of so little importance compared with State affairs in that bygone time are just those which are absolutely vital to the well-being of a nation. Nothing is more important than the just dealing of man with man.

As the rich men listened they heard words of woe, sterner words even than those of Isaiah. As for the hireling prophets, darkness would come upon them—darkness both of mind and soul. They would no longer be able to pretend to have vision or to practise as diviners. Covered with shame, they would hide their faces. In that hour of desperate distress they would have no message, real or pretended, from God.

And what was the distress to be? Just what had come upon Israel and Samaria; Assyria would ravage the land and empty the cities. The prophet traces the track of war from the familiar towns in the plain, through the well-known villages among the hills, right up to Jerusalem. In his sorrow and anger he makes bitter jokes on the names of the places which are to be ruined, crying: 'Tell it not in Gath (that is, Tell-town); weep not in Acco (Weep-town); the

inhabitants of Shaphir (Beauty-town) will be shamed ; the inhabitants of Saanan (March-town) shall not march out ;' and so forth.

Two warnings of his sounded peculiarly terrible in every ear. The prisoners of war should be carried into exile : that was the new plan of Assyria, not merely to kill and enslave, but to uproot and transplant whole nations, as a man would uproot great trees of the forest, and plant them again a thousand miles away. Also he proclaimed destruction to Jerusalem : the city, built as it were with the blood of the poor and cemented with the crimes of the rich, would become a heap of ruins ; its proud streets would be ploughed like a field, and the ruins of the fortresses become as shapeless as the mounds in a jungle.

As you will remember, Isaiah had declared that, whatever happened, Jerusalem was safe. Thus the two prophets appeared to contradict one another. But it was not really so. Isaiah was right as regards the present, Micah as regards the future. Jerusalem was safe just then, safe until God had gathered a company of faithful ones who would remain true to Him without a

temple and in a foreign land. But the time did come, only a century later, when Jerusalem was laid in ruins for the sins of the nation. In this matter Micah saw farther than Isaiah.

But if the two prophets differed somewhat in the woes they predicted, they agreed in the glorious promises they brought. Micah looked beyond the ruined Jerusalem of his vision, and its shattered towers, to a day afar off, and yet sure to come. He saw the city rebuilt and become the centre of the nations of the earth. Isaiah thought Jerusalem would never be conquered, but he too saw it transfigured. They use identical words to describe that day of glory. Then the mountain on which Jerusalem stood would be the most famous in the world; the great roads up to it would be full of people from all lands, flowing towards it in never-ceasing streams. Many nations would say to one another: 'Come ye and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, and He will teach us of His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.' And as they learnt God's will, all the nations would be at peace. They would cease to prepare for war. Swords and spears would be quite useless, so the swords would be beaten into

ploughshares, and the spears into pruning-hooks. This is all that Isaiah said on this subject.

But Micah, who had seen so often the tragedy of the ruined homesteads of the poor, and had watched the country folk trembling before some rich overlord or robber captain, added another touch to the picture, and said: ‘They shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig-tree, *and none shall make them afraid.*’ It is a beautiful dream of a perfect world. Not yet has it fully come to be, nor will it come to be quite in the way these two great prophets expected. The nations do not come to Jerusalem for the Gospel. The Gospel has to be carried to the lands where they dwell. But this is being done, and multitudes from far-off continents are coming home to God.

It was an amazing promise for Micah to proclaim, when the great army of Assyria was thundering its threats against all the cities within sight. Do you wonder why he was so sure that this would happen? I think if anyone had asked him he would have answered by telling of another great fact God had given him to know. A wonderful Ruler was to come to Judah, Who was

to be far greater than any king of the past. He should be great to the ends of the earth. He should completely conquer Assyria, their great enemy. He should be their Peace.

This was God's promise to Micah of a Messiah, a God-given King, sent to help the poor down-trodden folk. Nathan had hinted at it. Isaiah had proclaimed it. Now Micah set his seal to the promise, and he added two beautiful features to the picture. This King was not to come from great Jerusalem, the city that overshadowed every town and village in the land. No, but from a little country place, from Bethlehem, whence David, the people's hero, had come. This new Ruler would be one of the people, one of themselves by lowly birth, though so high above them in the vastness of His sway.

And He would be a *shepherd* to them. Well they knew what a shepherd's work was—to watch the flock and to keep it safe from fierce wild beasts, and to see that it had food and shelter. This coming One was to be a shepherd to His people, not a tyrant, not a hard tax-gatherer, not a distant, indifferent master. Can you not imagine how the pinched faces and the dull eyes of the

listening labourers would brighten as they heard this great good news ?

When God sent His Son, Micah's words were proved true. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, and He was the son of a village maiden, and grew up to be a carpenter. Truly He was one of the people and cared for the poor. Did He not describe Himself aright when He said, 'I am the Good Shepherd' ?

We do not know how long Micah went on prophesying. Some people think until Manasseh, the wicked son of Hezekiah, came to the throne. But this we know: Micah's preaching reached the ears of King Hezekiah in Jerusalem, and in some ways made a deeper impression than the words of Isaiah, great orator and statesman though he was. It was Micah's warning words concerning Jerusalem which did much to make the king a reformer. Because of the prophet, he broke down the shrines for idolatrous worship throughout the land, and commanded that the sacrifices should be offered only in Jerusalem, or at least without the symbolical pillars, and sacred trees, and graven images, which the people had borrowed from heathen nations around them.

Isaiah's words appealed to the few, Micah's to the many. His preaching was remembered well a century afterwards. When the priests and prophets wished to kill Jeremiah for predicting the destruction of Jerusalem, some of the elders called to mind what Micah had said, and quoted the very words he used when he declared that Jerusalem would be ploughed like a field. They reminded their hearers also that when Hezekiah and his people repented, and put away idolatrous worship, the threatened punishment did not fall.

Thus we see that this villager, this small farmer, came to be one of the most powerful preachers whom the Jews ever heard. Amos and Hosea were only approved by a few, and appeared to make almost no impression. Isaiah struggled on forty years before he gained his victory. Jeremiah went weeping all his days because the people would not hearken. But Micah prevailed. We are not surprised. The short book which he has left us shows us how he caught the ear of his listeners. In especial there is a vivid little drama which forms one of the half-dozen most famous passages in the Bible, and the Bible, as you know, is *the* book, the book of the whole world.

In this drama there are three who speak—the prophet, the Lord, and the people. The prophet bids the people hearken; the Lord pleads with them; the people complain that He asks too much, and that even a firstborn child will not satisfy Him; finally the prophet tells them how few and simple are God's demands. Here is the prophet's message arranged as in a drama.

The Prophet: ‘Hear ye now what the Lord saith: “Arise, contend thou before the mountains, and let the hills hear thy voice.” Hear, O ye mountains, the Lord's argument, and ye enduring foundations of the earth: for the Lord hath a quarrel with His people, and with Israel He cometh to argue.’

The Lord: ‘My people, what have I done unto thee? And how have I wearied thee? answer me! For I brought thee up from the land of Egypt, and from the house of slavery I redeemed thee. . . .’

The People: ‘Wherewithal shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the most high God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves of one year? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with

myriads of rivers of oil? Shall I give my first-born for a guilt offering, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

The Prophet: ‘He hath shewn, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?’

CHAPTER XIX

JEREMIAH, THE WEEPING PROPHET

JEREMIAH I, V, VII, XI, XXV, XXVI, XXXVI.

MORE than six hundred years before the coming of our Lord there was living in the little village of Anathoth, a few miles outside Jerusalem, a priest whose name was Hilkiah. He seems to have been well known in Palestine, and was, perhaps, a descendant of the Chief Priest Abiathar, whom Solomon had banished to his estate at Anathoth. If that were so, Hilkiah had reason to be proud of his family, for Abiathar was descended from Moses, and had had much to do with the founding of Jerusalem and the special worship of God there. However that may be, Hilkiah feared and loved Jehovah, and pondered the story of his people, and taught his son Jeremiah to do the same.

To some of the greatest of the prophets the call

did not come till mid-life, and then often after some terrible or sad experience. But with Jeremiah this was not so. There never seems to have been a time when his soul was not open to God. When he wandered out upon the terraced hillsides about his home, where the strong vines spread their branches and gripped the warm earth, it was not to dream idly in the sweet air and be glad to see the grapes reddening in the golden sunshine ; he went to think over the precious knowledge that had been given to his nation, and to learn to put aside all thoughts that were not pure and true, till he could see quite clearly the real meaning of things.

He was like a man holding a little mirror which he watched and cleansed and watched again till the visions that came to him upon its surface grew ever clearer and brighter and more convincing. Sometimes he walked in the streets of Jerusalem and heard the talk of the booths and the market-place, and sometimes he saw King Josiah passing by in dignity and state with his servants and his ministers. By degrees he learned something of his thoughts and plans for his kingdom.

And at last, as he kept turning again from the outside world to his visions and to the voice that spoke in his heart, he began to see and hear so clearly that he knew that the time had come to teach the people. The voice told him that even before he was born he had been in the thought of God as one who should show the truth to his fellow-men, and that he must linger no longer, but go forth and warn them of their danger.

But Jeremiah shrank from what God was giving him to do, and cried out that he was too young. ‘Ah, Lord God !’ he prayed, ‘behold, I cannot speak ; for I am a child.’ He would gladly have hidden himself and lived alone with the wonderful and awful knowledge that had come to him. Like Moses, he felt himself too weak to oppose a king and to set himself against the wishes of a people. But he had to learn, like Moses, that he must leave himself in God’s hands. He learned that his mouth was not the mouth of an ordinary man, for the Lord had touched it, and he was to utter, not his own thoughts, but the truth that God gave him.

Two visions came to him. The first was of an almond-tree which, because it is the earliest of its

kind to put forth blossom, was called by the Hebrews the ‘early waking tree.’ And this, he learned, was a picture of God, Who is prompt and watchful.

The second vision was of a boiling pot sending out its scalding steam from the north. And this God showed him was the trouble to come upon Israel when the kingdoms of the north should come down upon Judah.

And now he was bidden to rise up and go to the people who had turned to false gods and to worshipping things made with their own hands, and warn them to put away all wrong-doing and foolishness. Though he felt himself to be weak, God promised to make him strong enough to confront the whole people. He should be like a city with strong defences, like an iron pillar, like walls of brass, so that those that hated his message and longed to silence him should be powerless. God said to him : ‘They shall fight against thee ; but they shall not prevail against thee ; for I am with thee to deliver thee.’

From that moment Jeremiah gave himself to God entirely. Torture and imprisonment, terrible though they were to his body, could not still his

voice. Even while people hated and reviled him he held up the truth before their unwilling eyes. He became ready and willing to give up all the things that other men prized. He had no wife, no children, and often no home. He never spent a moment in planning for his own welfare, and only when sorrow overcame him did he cry to God to deal gently with him.

Perhaps you are wondering why Jeremiah should be filled with such terrible sadness. Other prophets had to suffer opposition, disappointment, and misunderstanding, and yet he stands out from among them as the most sorrowful of all—as having had to carry a burden almost too grievous to be borne. Let us look at this burden, that we may understand a little of his suffering.

It is true that King Josiah was not indifferent to the evil ways of his people. A priest had discovered a book in the Temple—a book we now believe to have been Deuteronomy—and had brought it to him. And the king, when he had read it and understood how unfaithful his people had been, was filled with grief and fear, and made a great endeavour to put away all idolatry from the nation. In the valley of Topheth the

Israelites had begun to sacrifice their little children to the horrible god Molech, and in many places temples had been built to Baal and Ash-taroth.

But although Josiah set to work to pull down the temples and to break the altars, and insisted that the nation should return to the worship of the true God, yet people did not really change. Even those who believed they had been wrong were scarcely less heathen than they had been before. They imagined that the God of Israel was just such another as Baal, who, so long as they offered costly sacrifices, did not care at all about the kind of life they lived. They would not understand that God was not asking for burnt offerings of bullocks and sheep, but for righteousness and holiness. So that the very fact that they had changed the outside of things and not the spirit made Jeremiah's work doubly difficult. They were like the Pharisees, who almost broke the heart of our Lord Himself. They were so sure that they were right that they could learn nothing at all.

Then, too, Jeremiah followed close upon Isaiah, who had taught the people that whatever

happened, Jerusalem and the Temple should be safe. Yet the terrible message entrusted to him was quite the contrary. He had to declare that destruction was coming, and that nothing but repentance and submission could save them. Isaiah's message had been true for his own day ; but the people liked to believe that it was true for always, and poured their anger and contempt upon Jeremiah for daring to say otherwise. They believed that God Himself would perish if Jerusalem were overthrown. They did not understand that He was the mighty Spirit Who abided for ever, even though His Temple should be rased to the ground. So that Jeremiah stood absolutely alone.

Isaiah had been the leader of a party, but Jeremiah had no party at all. Not one of his fellow-prophets would raise his voice in assent.

But the worst and most terrible burden of all was the knowledge that, teach them and implore them as he might, the people would not listen and would not repent. He made a picture of the awful punishment that awaited them : how armies of horsemen with swords and bows in their hands would pour out of the north, filling



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the air with their strange, fierce cries, and spreading terror in their path. He told them how they would be starved and robbed and murdered, and would be forced to hide in desolate places. And as this vision rose before his eyes he was overcome with grief, for he loved his people and loved the sacred city of Jerusalem. He felt that he must weep day and night for those who should be slain and for the homeless ; he pleaded with God to have mercy.

Then, at the bidding of the Lord, he searched the streets of Jerusalem for a single man who should care for the truth. Failing to find even one, he sighed to himself : ‘ Surely these are poor ; they are foolish : for they know not the way of the Lord, nor the judgment of their God.’ He turned to the great men of the nation, but here, too, he searched in vain. Again he was bidden to stand in the Temple gate and listen to the people, as they passed out and in, talking glibly of ‘ the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord,’ repeating it over and over as though the Temple were all that mattered, and in its shadow they were safe.

So, year in, year out, he continued to hold up before the Jews the terror and destruction that should come out of the north if their spirit remained unchanged. Then, when Josiah had been killed in a fierce conflict with the king of Egypt, and his son Shallum, after reigning for three months, had been succeeded by another son, Jehoiakim, a very bitter thing happened to Jeremiah. The men of his own little village of Anathoth were so enraged that he should continue to prophesy disaster that they plotted to murder him. Although they failed in this, Jeremiah felt that the very people who had known him best had cast him off, and had declared him unfit to live.

But though Jeremiah had moments when he cried to God in despair and besought Him to have mercy on the people, unrepentant though they were, one very sweet and beautiful thing was shown to him. He learned that in the heart of God Himself was an infinite sorrow ; that the Lord was as a man who had been outraged and insulted by the person who was dearest of all to him. Had He not loved Israel, taught her and cared for her, and brought

her into the Land of Promise ? And in place of the faith and loyalty that should be His, was He not receiving lying and ingratitude ? Israel was even offering God the insult of treating Him as though He were Molech or Baal — those horrible creatures who had no real existence, but had grown out of the very lowest and most cruel part of men's minds.

When God drew so near to Jeremiah that His agony was revealed, Jeremiah struggled no longer. The command came to him once more to warn the people of coming evil, and, ceasing to weep, he answered quite simply : ' So be it, Lord.'

Jeremiah was to face a yet greater danger than the plot of the men of Anathoth.

One day, as he stood uttering his warning in the Temple court, the rage of the prophets and priests passed all bounds ; they made so great a clamour that the princes appeared on the scene, and were immediately assailed by demands that a man who could prophesy the doom of Jerusalem was worthy of death. But Jeremiah repeated steadily that his warning came from God, and that in slaying him they would be shedding innocent blood.

Here some of the elders of the city interferred ; they recalled to the people's mind how Micah the prophet had also threatened Jerusalem with destruction. But, said they : ' Was he on that account put to death ? Did he not fear the Lord and besought the Lord, and the Lord repented Him of the evil which He had pronounced against them ? Thus might we procure great evil against our souls.' Ahikam, one of the sons of Shaphan, also used his influence that Jeremiah should not be given up to the people. Thus once again he escaped death.

In the fourth year of the reign of Jehoiakim it seems that Jeremiah could no longer go freely where he would. Though not actually imprisoned, he was watched and hindered. This did not mean, however, that his teaching must stop ; for now God told him that all the prophecies he had uttered must be written down, so that the king and the princes might receive his message clearly.

He sent for a scribe named Baruch, who wrote in a great roll—the manner in which books were made in those days—everything that Jeremiah told him. When the writing was all

finished, he told Baruch to take the book and read it to the people.

Now, a fast-day had been proclaimed in Jerusalem, and men were disposed to silence and thought, and when Baruch brought his roll to the Temple gate and entered the room of Shaphan the scribe, he was soon the centre of a group prepared to give him their whole attention. Michaiah, the son of Shaphan, all of whose family were friendly to the prophet, had no sooner heard the reading than he hastened to the palace of Jehoiakim, to the room set apart for scribes, and there, among other important people, he found the princes. Here he poured out all he had heard.

The princes, really stirred by his account, bade him bring Baruch before them, that they might hear the very words of the roll. 'Sit down,' they said to him, 'and read it in our ears.' So Baruch read once more, and his listeners trembled at the reproaches of the prophet. 'Surely,' said they, 'we will tell the king of all these words.' Not knowing in what spirit the king might receive them, the princes advised that Jeremiah and Baruch should remain in hiding, and then, leaving the roll in the room of the scribes, they sought

the king's presence. But not content with their version, the king sent for the roll, and once more it was read aloud.

Now it was winter-time, and in the hall in which they were gathered a fire was burning in a brazier, casting flickering shadows upon the walls. In scornful silence the king heard Jehudi the scribe through three or four columns, and then in a burst of savage anger tore the roll from his hands, ripped it in pieces with a knife, and thrust it into the flames. Even as he did it, men about him breathed more freely ; the cold fear that had clutched them loosened its grasp. But when the king would have wreaked his rage upon Baruch and Jeremiah, they were not to be found. Their work was not yet complete, and God had helped them to a safe hiding-place.

The prophecies, however, were not destroyed with the parchment on which they were written. The command of God came to Jeremiah to take a new roll, and once more to write down all that had been shown to him. Again he and Baruch laboured together, adding many new words to those that were written in the first book. And not content with this, Jeremiah boldly sent word

to Jehoiakim, demanding to know why the roll had been burnt, and declaring that punishment should fall on the king and his family.

At last the fulfilment of the prophet's warning began. Out of the north poured the vast armies of Babylon, thirsting to conquer the world. Kingdoms went down before their fierce onset, and among other neighbouring kings Jehoiakim was forced to become the vassal of Nebuchadrezzar.

But confident in the belief that Jerusalem could not fall, and encouraged by the king of Egypt, Jehoiakim rebelled, and then, before he could pay the penalty of his rashness, he died. His son Jehoiachin had scarcely been upon the throne three months when the Chaldeans (as the people of Babylon were then called) besieged Jerusalem. Surrender followed, and the king and many of his nobles were carried into captivity. In his stead Nebuchadrezzar appointed Zedekiah to be ruler—a ruler who was not free, but bound by solemn oath to render tribute to his Babylonian overlord.

CHAPTER XX

JEREMIAH, THE MARTYR-PROPHET

JEREMIAH XXX, XXXII—XLIII, LII.

AT the beginning of Zedekiah's reign Jeremiah probably received more respect than at any other time in his life. The great disaster he had foretold had come to pass, and men must have looked upon him with something like awe, as one who had the power of seeing into the future. But this did not mean that they were therefore more inclined to listen to advice they disliked. Had Jeremiah been silent, he might even have been a popular figure in Jerusalem, but he still had to tell the Jews truths they were unwilling to receive.

Now that they had been conquered, and had sworn to accept the rule of Babylon, there was but one thing to be done according to the prophet: they must make a real submission to

their conquerors. He saw that since this punishment had come upon them for their sins, they must accept it humbly until their repentance should be complete and God should change His purpose towards them. But this advice the princes heard with indignation. Already the false prophets were declaring the return of the exiles and the restoration of the beautiful vessels that had been carried away from the Temple. They looked for help to the Egyptians, who longed to break the power of Nebuchadrezzar. The poor young king kept turning undecidedly from one side to the other. He would have liked to listen to Jeremiah, but dared not stand alone, and finally he was brought to consent to the rebellion.

Nebuchadrezzar was swift to reply. Like an eagle, he swooped down and laid siege to Jerusalem. But this time it almost seemed as though the triumph was to be with the Jews. Just at the right moment the Egyptians came to the rescue, and the besieging armies broke up and retired. How the princes must have exulted ! But if they thought to find the prophet shaken in his belief, they were mistaken. ‘Though ye

had smitten the whole army of the Chaldeans that fight against you,' he told them, 'and there yet remained but some wounded men among them, yet should they rise up, every man in his tent, and burn this city with fire.'

At the time of the seeming victory, when the enemy had retired, Jeremiah went out of the city to secure some property that had been left to him. Instantly he was seized by the captain of the gate, who accused him of traitorously going over to the Chaldeans. It was in vain that he denied the charge. He was thrust into a dungeon in the house of a scribe called Jonathan, which had been turned into a prison, and there lay for many long days.

In the meantime King Zedekiah was growing more and more uneasy. What if this triumph should prove as vain as the prophet had said ? What if Nebuchadrezzar's vengeance should only be the more terrible for the repulse he had received ? At last, unable any longer to bear the fears that beset him, he sent a messenger to bring Jeremiah, that he might question him as to the fate of Israel.

Although darkness and hunger had told upon

the prophet's strength, he did not try to gain favour by giving false comfort. First of all, he delivered his message. 'Thou shalt be delivered into the hands of the Chaldeans,' he declared, and to this he added a plea for justice. He demanded to know for what reason he had been thrust into prison. If Zedekiah still had cause to fear the Chaldeans, what had become of the false prophets who had proclaimed that Israel should be troubled no more? 'O my lord king,' he cried, 'let my supplication, I pray thee, be accepted before thee, that thou cause me not to return to the house of Jonathan the scribe, lest I die there.'

Then Zedekiah, who well knew that this man was incapable of treachery, and had only been imprisoned through the malice of his enemies, granted what justice was in his power. He commanded that Jeremiah should be confined in the court of the guard, and that every day he should be given a loaf from the street of the bakers, so long as there was bread in the city.

And now the advance of Nebuchadrezzar's armies became evident, and the king's forebodings were fast changing into panic. Once

more an opportunity of warning the whole people came to Jeremiah. He told them that for those who remained in the city there was death by sword, famine, and pestilence; only those who went forth to submit to Babylon should be saved. Jerusalem should be burned to the ground.

When word was carried to the princes of this terrible prophecy, they determined that his mouth should be closed for ever. 'We beseech thee,' they begged Zedekiah, 'let this man be put to death; for he weakeneth the hands of the men of war that remain in this city, and the hands of all the people, in speaking such words unto them; for this man seeketh not the welfare of this people, but the hurt.' Poor Zedekiah listened to them gloomily, and his answer shows how well he knew his own weakness. 'Behold, he is in your hand,' he said, 'for the king is not he that can do anything against you.'

His permission was eagerly seized upon, and they now bethought themselves that a quick death was too easy an end for a man they chose to consider a traitor. In the court of the guard was a horrible underground dungeon. Into this

they let down Jeremiah by cords till he sank in the foul mire. Then they left him there to perish.

But help was to come from an unexpected quarter. Among the king's servants was a black man, an Ethiopian, called Ebed-melech, who knew and loved the prophet, and heard of his fate with horror. Instantly he carried the news to the king, who at the moment was at one of the gates of the city, and Zedekiah, glad to undo the result of his own cowardice, bade him take cords and three men to help him, and release the prisoner.

Ebed-melech, with tender forethought, first took some soft old rags from the king's house, and throwing them down to Jeremiah, told him how to place them in such a way that the cords would not chafe him. No doubt he guessed that there were already wounds, for no such precaution would be taken by men who planned a cruel and lingering death. Then, slowly and carefully, he and the men who helped him drew the prisoner up to daylight and fresh air.

Again and again after this, Zedekiah turned to Jeremiah to know God's will, but now he did so

in secret, and warned the prophet to speak no more publicly. He was kept as before in the court of the guard. Shut up here apart from his fellows, for the first time he began to see far ahead the dawning of the day when a captivity of seventy years in Babylon should be ended, and the evil-doing of his people should be pardoned, and God should bless them as of old.

And now once more his words of warning were fulfilled. The Chaldeans closed round the walls of Jerusalem, and an awful time of fear and famine followed. Zedekiah had been king for eleven years, and his reign was about to end in darkness. No Egyptians came to the rescue now, for Egypt was busy with other matters, and except where her own interest was concerned, did not care at all what happened to the little nation of the Jews. The priests and prophets who had urged on the rebels and foretold victory were silent before the gaunt and famine-stricken people who haunted the streets of the city.

Then one night, when despair had come upon them like a black cloud, an escape was attempted

where the king's garden ended at the walls. Under cover of the darkness the king and his men passed out, and fled towards the plain of Jericho. But the alarm was given. Weakened by hunger, they could not outstrip the Chaldeans. The little army was scattered, and the king was brought before Nebuchadrezzar to receive sentence for his broken oath. How terrible was the punishment! Zedekiah saw his two sons put to death, and then his eyes were put out, and he was carried captive into Babylon to dwell in darkness all his remaining days.

Now followed disaster on disaster. Nebuzar-adan, Nebuchadrezzar's chief general, was commanded to destroy Jerusalem. The Temple and the king's house and all the houses were burnt, the very walls of the city being broken down. The leaders of the rebellion were put to death, and all the remaining people of consequence carried into exile.

To Jeremiah the fate that had overtaken the Temple and sacred city was none the less terrible because he had predicted it. His was also the grief of a rejected prophet. Had but the leaders of the people been willing to humble themselves

and receive God's message, all this destruction had been avoided.

There is no doubt that death would have been to him a deliverance, but this was not to be. It was inevitable that the Chaldean leaders should look upon him as a friend, since he had steadily counselled submission to their rule. They therefore gave him the liberty of choice. Would he come with them to Babylon, where, no doubt, he might have ended his days in ease and comfort, or would he prefer to remain with the handful of poor folk who were left behind to till the land and dress the vines? Not for an instant did he hesitate. His place was with the remnant of the Lord's people, near the still smouldering ruins of Jerusalem. Perhaps now that punishment had fallen so heavily he would not speak in vain.

Nebuzar-adan had appointed Gedaliah, a grandson of the prophet's friend Shaphan, to be ruler, and it seemed not impossible that he would prove a safe guide for the people. The Jews who had made their homes in neighbouring districts were filled with fresh confidence, and gathered into Judah, and were soon busy cultivating the land. Everything was beginning to smile for these poor

labourers of the soil, when disquieting rumours that a plot was going forward among the Ammonites reached the ears of some of the leaders. Unfortunately, Gedaliah refused to believe treachery possible, and would take no steps to protect himself, with the result that he was murdered at Mizpah.

And now, without any wise ruler, the Jews felt themselves completely adrift. They were so small a company that they seemed to be at the mercy of the surrounding tribes, and besides, were afraid that they would be visited with the wrath of Nebuchadrezzar for the death of the leader he had appointed.

Headed by the two captains Johanan and Azariah, they came in a body to consult the one man who had gone his appointed way without weakness and fear. They were full of a plan for taking refuge in Egypt, and wished to have their decision strengthened by the prophet's approval. They besought him to pray to God for them, and to tell them God's will for the future. Jeremiah, who had prayed for them all his life, did not refuse now. But he made it a condition that when God revealed His will, they should show

themselves absolutely obedient, and this they promised faithfully they would do.

For ten days Jeremiah prayed to God in solitude. It would be so great a thing if these few people, who had suffered bitterly for their sins and the sins of their leaders, should at length consent to do right for its own sake. At the end of this time he called the Jews before him, and delivered to them the will of the Lord.

He told them that they need not fear the king of Babylon. So long as they remained in Palestine, God would be with them, and they should be at peace. But if through faintness of heart they should go into Egypt, the very terrors from which they fled—famine and the sword—should overtake them there.

Then Johanan and Azariah and the other leaders showed how insincere had been their demand for help. ‘Thou speakest falsely,’ they answered Jeremiah; ‘the Lord our God hath not sent thee to say, “Go not into Egypt to sojourn there,” but Baruch the son of Neriah setteth thee on against us to deliver us into the hands of the Chaldeans, that they may put us to death and carry us away captives to Babylon.’

In their resentment they felt as though he had been the author of all their troubles, and, being insincere themselves, could not believe in the truth of any other man.

So once more Jeremiah had spoken in vain. He followed his obstinate, foolish people into Egypt, there to see them falling more and more into evil ways and giving their worship to false gods. His life closed, as it had begun, in sorrow and struggle and disappointment. But one thing he could not do, and that was to be false to his vision. There is a tradition among the Jews that he met a martyr's end, and was stoned to death because the people became exasperated by his upbraiding ; but of this we have no proof.

Darkness can never quite have closed upon him. Before his eyes shone the vision of Israel restored and humbled, the Temple rebuilt, and God blessing the nation that had come purged out of the fire. We cannot but believe that death was the breaking of the dawn upon the soul of Jeremiah.

CHAPTER XXI

HOW JEREMIAH TAUGHT

JEREMIAH XIX, XX, XXVII-XXIX, XXXII, XXXV.

THOUGH Jeremiah received little but hatred and contempt during his life, it was a very different matter when the Jews returned from exile and settled once more in Palestine. The men who had opposed him so bitterly were all dead, and their children, who had suffered for their faults, were able to look upon the past with clearer eyes.

As the years passed by, his fame grew ever greater, and everything he had written was prized by the Jews. They saw now that to take him for a traitor had been a blindness of an extraordinary kind, for he had loved his country in the highest way. They began to understand the strength of a man who, through a long life of sorrow and disappointment, had never tried to

seek favour, and with resolute faithfulness had continued to deliver a message his countrymen were unwilling to hear.

All truth comes from God, and therefore endures for ever, and it seemed as though Jeremiah's teaching only became more living as the generations came and went.

His writing was very simple and direct, and he had besides a wonderful gift of presenting what he had to teach in a kind of picture which held their attention. In this chapter I want to put a few of these stories or pictures before you. Often they were things he actually did in front of the people, that he might make them see where they had been blind. Here is a very famous one.

Living in Palestine in those days was a clan known as the Rechabites, whose ancestor, Jondab, the son of Rechab, had laid down certain rules for their way of life. Among other things, he had forbidden them to drink wine. Jeremiah describes how, at the command of God, he sought out these people, and brought them to a room in the Temple, and set before them jugs full of wine, and cups, and said, 'Drink ye wine.'

But they answered without hesitation that they must obey their forefather Jonadab, who had forbidden them to drink wine and to do many other things common to men. ‘Do you not see,’ Jeremiah said to the people, ‘that the Rechabites know how to keep faith with their father Jonadab, the son of Rechab? But ye keep no faith with the Lord, who has cared for you and guided you.’

Here is another such picture-sermon, in which hardly a word was needed to drive it home.

Early in the reign of Zedekiah there seems to have been a council held in Jerusalem, to which the kings of neighbouring tribes had sent representatives. They were met together to consider how best they could join their forces to throw off the power of Babylon. As they sat in grim debate,—the king of the Jews at their head, hardly knowing what he wished, but feeling himself steadily drawn into dangerous decisions by his advisers—a strange thing happened. Suddenly there appeared in their midst the stern figure of the prophet, bearing in his arms a confused, ungainly bundle. Before they could protest, the thing was done. Zedekiah and each representa-

tive of the neighbouring kingdoms had received the yoke and trappings of an ox, and the latter were bidden to carry the offering to their royal masters. There was no mistaking his meaning. Plot as they might, God willed that the yoke of the conqueror should rest upon their necks.

But though Zedekiah, if left to himself, might have accepted the sign, the priests and the princes only looked upon it as an insult from one who was determined to oppose them in their desire to regain their liberty.

When they refused to understand, Jeremiah went yet further, and one day appeared before the priests and assembled people in the Temple wearing a wooden yoke, to show that he, at least, had accepted the will of God. One of the false prophets, Hananiah by name, pretending that he, too, had received the command of God, cried out so that all might hear: ‘Thus speaketh the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, saying, “I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two full years will I bring again into this place all the vessels that Nebuchadrezzar, king of Babylon, took away from this place and carried to Babylon: and I will bring again to this

place Jehoiachin, the son of Jehoiakim, the king of Judah, with all the captives that went into Babylon," saith the Lord: "for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon."

Jeremiah answered ironically that when this prophecy had come to pass, then should Hananiah be known as a true prophet, whereupon Hananiah seized the wooden yoke which was round Jeremiah's neck, and broke it before the people. He was so eager that they should rebel that he did not hesitate to pretend that he was inspired. He cried again: 'Thus saith the Lord, "Even so will I break the yoke of the king of Babylon from the neck of all nations within the space of two full years."

Jeremiah quietly went his way, but when he was in solitude God taught him the reply he was to make, and, confronting Hananiah once more, he gave God's answer: 'Thus saith the Lord, "Thou hast broken the yokes of wood, but thou shalt make for them yokes of iron."

This prophecy was to prove only too true. Rebellion changed the easy government of the Babylonian king, which, like a yoke of wood, was light to carry, into a yoke of iron, that broke

the spirit of the people. As for Hananiah himself, Jeremiah foretold that, as a punishment for teaching rebellion to the people, he should die within the year. In the seventh month of the year Hananiah died.

Again, when Jeremiah wished to convince people that Jerusalem should be destroyed, he took a potter's earthen vessel. Gathering together the old men of the priests and of the people, who, more than others, clung to Isaiah's teaching, and wished to believe that he had intended it for all time, he led them out to the gate whence they could look down upon the valley of Topheth, where smouldering fires perpetually devoured the refuse of the city. He reminded them that, above this place, temples had been built to Baal ; in the valley itself they had sacrificed their children to false gods.

Then, dashing the vessel into the depths below, so that it shivered into innumerable pieces, he said to them : 'Thus saith the Lord, "Even so will I break this people and this city, as one breaketh a potter's vessel." ' He went on to tell them how Jerusalem should be defiled like the valley, and that in Topheth the slain of Jeru-

salem should be burned. They, no doubt, trembled at his words, and yet they turned obstinately away to follow their own wills.

When word of this prophecy was carried to Pashur the chief priest, he struck Jeremiah, and had him made fast in the stocks. The following day, when Pashur came to release him, Jeremiah burst out in a passion of personal resentment, from which he could not always free himself. He was not like Jesus, Who bore every insult patiently. The prophet turned upon Pashur and reviled him, and then once more repeated his prophecy against Jerusalem.

This shows us how terribly bitter his experience had been. There he had sat absolutely helpless for a day and a night, while his enemies had wreaked their spite. They had laughed at him and spat upon him. It had seemed to him beyond bearing. The longing for vengeance possessed him. He prayed that he might see his enemies put to confusion. In his bitterness he cursed the day of his birth, and cried out that all his days had been consumed by sorrow and shame. And yet, even while he was shaken by this agony of resentment, Jeremiah was conscious

that he must continue to speak. The Lord was with him 'like a mighty terrible one.'

As he saw his nation more and more resolved to join in the rebellion, he sought by yet another means to show them their folly. He wrote a letter to the Jews in Babylon, and sent it thither by a son of Shaphan. And this he did openly, quite as much to convince those at home as the exiles themselves. In it he told them to found families, and build houses, and plant gardens, and to pray for the peace of Babylon, for it should be their peace also. He told them to put no trust in the false prophets who promised instant deliverance, for seventy years must pass before the Lord led them again to their own land. But only insult and complaint came back to him. It was asked why Jeremiah, who could write such a letter, was not put in the stocks.

The following story makes one think that perhaps Jeremiah himself had made a journey into Babylon, for he speaks in it of the famous river of that country. He describes how God told him to put on a linen girdle, and when he had obeyed, bade him go to the banks of the River Euphrates and hide it in a hole in the rock

After many days he was bidden to return to the spot, and take out the girdle. And when he had dug it up from the place where he had hidden it, he found it rotten and good for nothing. Then said Jeremiah : ‘God made you cleave to Him as a girdle does to a man, that you might be a praise and glory to Him, but you would not. Therefore He shall make you like this girdle, rotten and useless.’

All these picture-sermons are very stern and sad, but I will end with one which is more hopeful.

I have told you how, after his rescue from the underground dungeon, God showed Jeremiah that the time of His anger would pass, that the exiles should return, and that the nation should again be blessed.

So Jeremiah describes to his hearers how his nephew came to urge him to buy a field from him at Anathoth, and that, even though he had foretold the destruction of Jerusalem, he bought the field, taking witnesses and weighing out the money. The people were to learn from this that though destruction was coming, yet buying and selling were not for ever ended. The day of

return would come, when business should be done as before, and when property should once more be of value.

It may seem to you that all this teaching was for the Jews only, and for them only at this special time, and you may wonder that in later days the Jews prized few things more highly than the Book of Jeremiah. But while it is true that in many ways Jeremiah's message was given only for that particular period and nation, yet running all through it were great thoughts for all time and all the world.

Jeremiah taught the Jews four things.

First, he brought home to them with great force a truth they had often been taught and had constantly overlooked. The God of Israel was the only real God. All others were only imaginations. His power alone was infinite and everlasting.

Secondly, that the nature of God is different from that of man. He is pure truth, and righteousness, and justice.

Thirdly, he taught them this great thing, which seemed almost more difficult than any other for them to remember—that a nation is not

blessed because it is rich and independent, but just in so far as it understands God's will and is obedient. A captive nation may be more blessed than its conqueror.

And fourthly, he told a new and wonderful truth, which no prophet had ever understood before, and which was like the first glimmering dawn of the teaching of our Lord Himself. He said that a day would come when all should worship the Lord, not outwardly, but in the spirit, when men should receive new hearts wherein the law of God should be written. So he taught that we cannot make ourselves good, and that however many prayers we pray, and however many gifts we make, these will not bring us really nearer to God unless our heart be right. It is only when we see that God alone can change us and make us love what He loves, and hate what He hates, that we are really humble enough for God to help us. And when we lose courage and say, 'It is useless to try to be good,' then we must ask God to do what the prophet promised—to give us new hearts. He will not fail to answer.

CHAPTER XXII

ZEPHANIAH, NAHUM, AND HABAKKUK

ZEPHANIAH I-III, NAHUM I-III, HABAKKUK I-III

You have heard of the little birds called stormy petrels which are seen far out at sea. They have received their name because they are heralds of the storm. Whenever they are seen flying near the crested waves, rejoicing in the rush of the wind, the wise mariner knows that a tempest, something more than an ordinary strong breeze, is on its way.

It has been well said that the prophets were the stormy petrels of history. When a great disaster was at hand, or some new terrible enemy was about to appear, the prophets most frequently brought their message. In times of confusion, and before days of pillage and destruction, they came to remind men that God was in and above the storm of human passions and conflicts.

We see this very clearly when these three prophets did their work. It was half a century since Isaiah and Micah had finished their labours, and during this time no great seer had arisen to speak the will of God. The long reign of Manasseh, Hezekiah's wicked son, was ended, and Josiah, his grandson, was on the throne. The mighty empire of Assyria was still supreme, and men had thought it would last for ever.

But at last strong young enemies were arising, and were at the throat of the old lion. Nineveh, the vast Assyrian capital, was threatened and near its fall. The Scythians, those savage horsemen, had swept like locusts over the empire; the Medes, hardy mountaineers from the east; the Chaldeans, a race of warriors from the south, were about to shake off the tyrant yoke, and were soon to be themselves supreme. The far-spreading kingdom, which had been built up at the cost of so much blood and suffering, was about to break into fragments.

Imagine the stir and tumult throughout the world if the empire of Britain were about to be overthrown; and Britain has ruled wisely and kindly. Then you can understand what people

felt when they saw destruction coming upon the empire of Assyria, whose soldiers had been so bloodthirsty and brutal. Zephaniah, Nahum, and Habakkuk all prophesied this final ruin.

I. Zephaniah, the Prophet of Judgment.

Zephaniah was the great-great-grandson of King Hezekiah, and therefore belonged to the royal line, and was of the aristocracy of Jerusalem. Just about the time that Josiah, who had been raised to the throne as a mere boy, came to young manhood, Zephaniah, also quite a young man, began his work. In these days, too, the youthful Jeremiah became a prophet of the Lord. It was a time when God's work was done by young men.

Josiah had already begun to bring about the reforms so sorely needed. Manasseh had slain the godly who worshipped God purely, and had done everything possible to undo the work of Isaiah and Micah. He had encouraged not merely the idolatrous worship of God, but had begun to worship the stars as the heathen did. Blackest sin of all, he had favoured the sacrifice of little children in the fires of the god Molech, and had even caused his own firstborn to die

this horrible death. Josiah was doing his best to purify Jerusalem, and to make his land once more righteous and God-fearing, but his people were slow to support him, and Zephaniah saw no hope of any enduring success. His message was a terrible message of judgment. To him it seemed too late to hope to save the nation by repentance. The dread day of the Lord was at hand.

This is how his book begins: 'I will sweep, sweep away everything from the face of the ground, sweep man and beast, sweep the fowl of the heaven, and the fish of the sea, and I will bring to ruin the wicked, and cut off the men of wickedness from the ground. And I will stretch forth My hand upon Judah and upon all the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and I will cut off from this place the remnant of Baal, the priestlings with the priests, and them who upon the house-tops bow themselves to the host of heaven, and them who swear by their Molech, and them who have turned from following the Lord, and who do not seek the Lord, nor have inquired of Him. Silence for the Lord of lords! For near is the day of the Lord. The Lord has prepared a slaughter, He has consecrated His guests.'

It almost seems as if Zephaniah thought that this 'day of the Lord' was to be the Last Day, the end of everything. But that was not what he meant. There were little flowers of promise among his words of dread, like snowdrops rising from the frozen earth and the blackening leaves of winter. Like Isaiah, he proclaimed safety for the few who really did God's will. Yet even these promises are stern and few. He speaks not of the mercy of the Lord, but only cries: 'Seek the Lord, all ye meek of the land, who do His bidding; seek righteousness, seek meekness: it may be ye shall be hid in the day of the Lord's anger.'

What was the special sin of that day? This: many of the people had come to think that the Lord was powerless or indifferent. They spoke as if it did not matter to Him what happened. 'The Lord will not do good, neither will He do evil,' were the words they muttered to one another. Therefore they pleased themselves, and only wanted to be let alone. It was nothing to them whether right or wrong were done, for God Himself did not care.

The prophet answered them that the Lord

would soon show Himself to be both mighty and active. None should escape Him. He would search Jerusalem as a man searches with lamps, so that no nook or corner would serve as a hiding-place. ‘The great day of the Lord is near,’ the prophet cried, ‘it is near and hasteth greatly. Hark! the day of the Lord! A strong man, there, crieth bitterly.’ That last short sentence was the picture of that hour of terror. Not little children nor women weeping, but the strong man, crying bitterly like an affrighted child.

But this great and terrible day was not to descend on Judah merely; punishment was to come on all the nations of the earth, and not least on Assyria, the cruellest and the strongest of them all.

The prophet drew a sombre picture of the utter desolation of Nineveh the proud. In place of multitudes of people, there should be multitudes of beasts. The pelican and the porcupine, bird and beast who will not live where men are, would find nest and lair among her broken columns. The cedar-work of her stately houses would lie bare to the sky. Desolation would reign on the very thresholds where so

many busy feet had trod. ‘This is the joyous city,’ cried the prophet, ‘that dwelt carelessly, that said in her heart, “I am, and there is none else beside me.”’ How is she become a desolation, a place for beasts to lie down in ! Everyone that passeth by her shall hiss and wag his hand.’

It was but a few years before these words were proved literally true. Nineveh is now known only by mounds and heaps. The little city which grew up out of her ashes is some distance from her ancient site. Well might Zephaniah cry : ‘That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of wasteness and desolation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of the trumpet and alarm, against the fenced cities and against the high battlements.’

We wonder why this prophet brought so brief a message. Perhaps, like a few of our most gifted poets, he died very young. I do not think he could have been at Jeremiah’s side through the long sorrowful years without speaking again. But however that may be, at the end of his book there is a beautiful song of hope and peace. Some men cannot think that he, the prophet of woe and judgment, wrote it. They think that

another added it to remind us of the Lord's mercy and tenderness. Whoever wrote it, we are reminded that the God of judgment is the God of lovingkindness, for this is what we read : 'Sing, O daughter of Zion ; shout, O Israel ; be glad and rejoice with all the heart, O daughter of Jerusalem. Thou shalt not fear evil any more. The Lord thy God is in the midst of thee, a mighty One Who will save. He will rejoice over thee with joy ; He will rest in His love, He will joy over thee with singing.'

II. Nahum, the Prophet of Vengeance.

Zephaniah was not alone in predicting the vengeance of the Lord upon Assyria. There was another prophet, Nahum by name, whose whole prophecy was levelled against Nineveh. He is so full of her destruction that he has nothing else to say, nothing about his nation's sins, or about the future, when her enemy would be humbled to the dust. He has little to tell us, even about God, save that 'the Lord is a jealous God and avengeth; the Lord avengeth and is full of wrath ; the Lord taketh vengeance on His adversaries, and He reserveth wrath for His

enemies.' There is, indeed, one beautiful verse which tells us: 'The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; and He knoweth them that put their trust in Him.' But the rest of his book is almost wholly taken up with a description of the siege and conquest of the city whose soldiers had so often gone forth to cast other cities to the ground.

This prophecy is like one of those battle-pictures that we may see in some picture-galleries, in which there is nothing but smoke and flashing swords, and fighting soldiers, and men wounded and dying. Listen to these lines, and you will learn what a poet Nahum was, and how he painted with words.

'Woe to the city of blood !
Hark, the whip,
And the rumbling of the wheel,
And horses galloping,
And the rattling dance of the chariot !
Cavalry at the charge, and flash of sabres,
And lightning of lances,
Mass of slain and weight of corpses,
Endless dead bodies—
They stumble on their dead !'

Do you ask why God should let men put in

His holy Word such a picture of destruction? You must remember that this prophet did not know what we know, that God never punishes save in love, and with grief. He only knew, what we must never forget, that wickedness must be punished if men do not repent.

Assyria had been the horror and the terror of all the surrounding nations for a century or more. No one could conquer her or check her, and wherever her soldiers went, they left a trail of smoking cities and blood-stained homes, and weeping women, and little children cruelly done to death. She had seemed too mighty even for God to control. Many must have said: 'How can there be a righteous God, if all this hideous cruelty is allowed?' When at last it was seen that Assyria was to be punished, and punished by God's command, a great weight was lifted from men's souls, and their faith grew stronger. At last He was seen to be mightier than the mightiest of the earth. Though long delayed, His judgments did not slumber for ever. Nahum's prophecy was his way of saying, 'The Lord is the Almighty God, and a just judge.'

III. Habakkuk, the Questioning Prophet.

There was one other prophet who prophesied concerning the conquest of Assyria, about the same time as Zephaniah and Nahum. His name was **Habakkuk**, which, in spite of its strange harsh sound, has a beautiful meaning, ‘to embrace or to caress.’ Perhaps it was given to him as a child because he was full of love. But it was a suitable name for him when a man, both because he clung to the Lord in spite of his doubts, and because he comforted his nation as one who puts his arms about a weeping child.

He too knew the pride and cruelty of Assyria. He gives us one very striking picture of this robber empire. He describes Assyria as a fisherman who delights to catch fish both great and small, not simply that he may grow rich, but also for the pleasure of catching them and putting them to pain. Nothing escapes him, for he angles for the fish, and nets them, and drags the water for them. And this clever fisherman is so proud of his fishing-tackle—his rod and his net and his drag-net—that he sacrifices to them as if they were gods. And he has no sooner emptied his

net than he turns at once to his cruel game again, and the fish he catches and slays are *men*. These are the prophet's words: 'He taketh up all of them with the angle, he catcheth them in his net, and gathereth them in his drag: therefore he rejoiceth and is glad. Therefore he sacrificeth unto his net and burneth incense unto his drag; because by them his portion is fat and his meat plenteous. Shall he therefore empty his net, and not spare to slay the nations continually ?'

That was the question which Habakkuk was constantly asking himself, and which in the end he came to ask God. It was just because he had such high and beautiful thoughts of God that he could not understand why such a wicked and cruel nation should be allowed to continue its bloody work. 'Thou that art of purer eyes than to behold evil,' he says, 'and that canst not look on perverseness: wherefore lookest Thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest Thy peace when the wicked swalloweth up the man that is more righteous than he ?' Habakkuk was the first of the prophets to put such questions to God. He was not only anxious to warn wicked men against their sin, but also he wanted to

understand why God permitted wickedness to go on so long.

He was not, however, one of those impatient people who, as soon as they see anything they cannot easily explain, exclaim: 'There cannot be a God,' or, 'If there be a God, He is not just.' This prophet was very patient, and was sure there must be a good answer to his questions. Besides, he did not forget that there were other people whom he had to help and guard against evil thoughts of God. Therefore he did not begin to say, like the people in Zephaniah's day, 'The Lord will not do good, neither will He do evil.' He listened and watched and prayed. This is his description of himself: 'I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon the tower, and will look forth to see what He will speak with me, and what I shall answer concerning my complaint.'

And the Lord did answer him, and told him to make the vision plain to other people, just as if it were written on a great placard, easily to be read even by a man who was running past it.

What was the vision? Not some mysterious sign or sight, but the plain fact that a nation was

arising who would utterly rout Assyria and bring shame upon her pride.

He dared to face the very worst he knew about the tyrant Assyrian king, and wrote: 'He enlargeth his desire as hell, and he is as death, and cannot be satisfied, but gathereth unto him all nations, and heapeth unto him all peoples.' Yet the prophet became persuaded that this all-devouring nation was to come to an end. He had heard about a people called the Chaldeans, who, like the Jews, were subject to Assyria. Now, through his trust in God he read the signs of the times, and saw that this new nation, scarcely heard of before, was to become the conqueror of Assyria by God's will.

Thus, this chief doubt of his was laid to rest, and he wrote words which have become famous, because the Apostle Paul used them, and Martin Luther found peace through them: 'The just shall live by his faithfulness.' This is only another way of saying, 'The just shall live by his faith,' for it is through our trust in God that we are kept faithful in difficult days.

But there was something else which helped to lay Habakkuk's doubt to rest. He thought much

upon the history of his nation, and remembered how marvellously God had delivered Israel again and again, not only when He rescued her from Egypt, but also at other times. The more he thought of the great deeds whereby God had shown His mindfulness and His power in past days, the more sure he became that God was always mindful of His faithful ones, and would always provide for them, however black the outlook.

These thoughts of his were afterwards made into a poem, which is the last chapter of his book. It closes with these words, which have been often used in hymns and psalms, so that they have gone all over the world on wings of song, and have driven back the clouds of doubt from many hearts :

‘ Though the fig-tree do not blossom,
And no fruit be on the vines ;
Fail the produce of the olive,
And the fields yield no meat ;
Cut off be the flock from the fold,
And no cattle in the stalls,
Yet in the Lord will I exult,
I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.
Jehovah, the Lord, is my might,
He hath made my feet like the hinds’,
And on my heights He gives me to march.’

IV. Obadiah.

There is one other prophet of this time of whom you should know what little there is to tell. His book is the shortest in the Old Testament, and is filled with only one idea, the punishment of Edom.

The Edomites were the descendants of Esau, and for centuries had hated the children of Israel. From the time of David till a little while before our Lord's birth there were unceasing feuds between the two nations. But the hearts of the Jews were never more bitter against them than after the destruction of Jerusalem, for then they had jeered at the poor captives and their sorrows, and had wreaked their hate on any poor stragglers, like jackals devouring the remnants of the lion's feast.

Oftentimes we hear in the prophets the cry of Israel's indignation against their ancient enemies, and in the end of Jeremiah's writings we find several verses which are almost word for word the same as some of Obadiah's. Perhaps both were quoting from some ancient prophet who had rejoiced to think that Edom would be despoiled.

Now, to Obadiah the time for the fulfilment of this prophecy seemed near, and he included it in his own. It was the pride as well as the cruelty of the Edomites which impressed him most. They were proud, not of their great possessions, but of their rocky, lofty lands, which seemed to them safe as an eagle's eyrie. From these they looked down contemptuously on struggling Israel, less happily situated.

The prophet does little but assure these proud scorners that their day of suffering is at hand ‘The day of the Lord is near upon all the nations ; as thou hast done it shall be done unto thee : thy dealing shall return upon thine own head.’ In the same breath he declares that Judah’s day is not past. The house of Esau shall be as stubble for the flames of the house of Jacob. Champions shall yet come up to Mount Zion to judge the Mount of Esau.

Perhaps this little prophecy was included in the Bible because it was so clearly fulfilled. Within a hundred years of the Jewish captivity the Edomites had been driven from their lofty yet fertile land, into the great bare deserts and up-lands to the south of Judah. But it helps us

also to understand the struggle for faith among the exiles a thousand miles from home, amid their bitter memories of scorn and pain and contempt. The fire in their hearts was far from pure, for the smoke of desire for vengeance mingled with the flame of ardour for God's honour. But they did learn to trust, and are a lesson to us to trust also, even when mortified and bitter and ashamed; for the last word of Obadiah is this: 'And the kingdom shall be the Lord's.'

CHAPTER XXIII

EZEKIEL, THE SEER OF VISIONS

EZEKIEL I, II, IV, VIII, IX, X, XI, XXIV.

WHEN Nebuchadrezzar carried the young King Jehoiachin into exile, he carried captive also the men of war and craftsmen of every kind such as builders, joiners, and workers in metal. The nobility he removed, that the people left behind in Judah might be without leaders; the men of war, that, being ill defended, they could not so easily plan a rebellion; and the craftsmen, to help the little colony of exiles to build themselves houses when they had arrived in Babylon. Not only the men were taken, but their families also. They would thus the better settle down and take root in a strange land.

What a cruel march that must have been for the poor Jews when they were relentlessly driven forth from the city they loved, away into the

almost unknown country of the Chaldeans, fearing in their hearts that their eyes might never again rest on the dear familiar things of Palestine. Day after day they were driven over the rough roads, those who proved too weakly for the journey falling out by the wayside to perish of hunger.

When at last they found themselves within the borders of their conquerors, with what heart-sickness they must have gazed upon the magnificence of the Chaldean cities! Here were great thoroughfares thronged with busy people, spacious houses, and temples such as they had never imagined, piled story upon story, with a god enthroned upon the summit. They had always been so proud of Jerusalem with her sanctuary and her grey towers, but now amidst these gorgeous scenes their old pride in her splendours was humbled to the dust. Even the treasured history of her building and her victories faded as they saw the glory of the colossal capital and learnt a little of its vast affairs. Many a Jew passing footsore beneath the shadow of the mighty brick colonnades, as he looked about him with dazzled eyes, beholding the palaces blazoned

with their vermilion frescoes of victorious warriors, must have thought within himself that these Chaldean gods must be more powerful than the God of Israel. How else could this country prosper so? Would it not be better to bow down to them at once?

The Chaldeans, however, did not treat the exiled Jews as slaves. Once they had brought them so far into their domains as to render them powerless, they seem to have allowed them to settle down peaceably enough. Beyond jeering at their God, Who had not managed to win the day for Jerusalem, they did not interfere. It was at a place called Telabib, on the River Chebar, that many of the exiles were allowed to plant their little colony. Here, with their craftsmen to work for them, they might build their own houses ; but not of stone, as in Palestine, for they must now make bricks of clay and harden them in the sun, according to the custom of the country.

Hardly had they recovered strength from their journey before false hopes began to spring up once again. They were soon dreaming dreams of a speedy return, and it seemed to them useless to spend much time and strength on building

houses. In this land that was polluted by idolatry they could raise no temple. It was not possible here to sacrifice to the Lord. They would live from day to day as easily as they could till the hour came when their faces should be turned homewards.

Word of their hopes and plans was somehow carried to Jerusalem, perhaps by one who managed to escape; and Jeremiah, as you have heard, wrote a letter urging them to face the truth; to build houses and lay out gardens and engage in business, for freedom would come only for their children, not for them.

But at least one man looked to God with unfaltering faith, and without question accepted the punishment that had come upon his nation. This was Ezekiel, the son of Buzi, a priest who had loved the worship of the Temple with all his heart. Taught by Jeremiah, he saw the purpose of God in all that had happened, and lamented the obstinacy of his people. More than any he felt the difficulty of worship in an unclean land, but not for one moment did his imagination turn to the gods of the Chaldeans. More than ever he was the priest of the Living God, and prayed



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to Him in singleness of heart. He knew that longings for home could not be satisfied for many weary years, not until the people had really repented the evils of the past. With unquestioning trust, he looked deep into the history of his nation, that he might understand the bitter lesson given them to learn.

It was not until five years of captivity had come and gone that Ezekiel was set apart to be a prophet of God.

He had gone out to the bank of the river, and as he stood plunged in thought, he was suddenly aware of a rising wind blowing upon his face, and as he looked he saw that it was driving towards him a great cloud, out of which shone fire. Nearer and nearer it came, till he was able to discern in its burning depths, where flames darted and sparkled like lightning, four wonderful creatures, glowing like molten metal. Each had four faces—of a man, an ox, an eagle, and a lion—and each four glorious wings, which touched tip to tip. Beneath were four wheels, blue-green like the beryl-stone, and with high, dreadful rims set with eyes. The sky above had the clear, awful depth of a great crystal, and the

sound of the wings was like the rush of mighty waters.

Raising his eyes, he now perceived a yet more awe-inspiring sight. Upon a throne of blue sapphire was a great Presence, like the form of a man glowing with inward fire, the whole circled round with the many-coloured radiance of the rainbow. Then Ezekiel knew himself in the very presence of God, and fell upon his face.

A voice commanded him to stand upright, and strength was breathed into him to obey. Then the voice told him that he was set apart to speak the will of the Lord to the rebellious people, and that though their words should tear him like cruel thorns and briars, he should be made strong to endure. Upon this a hand came out of the fiery cloud, holding a roll which, when it was spread out before him, was seen to be full of words on both sides. Strange as it may seem to us, he was commanded to eat it, which perhaps only meant that he was to make it a part of himself. Like the touching of Jeremiah's mouth in the much simpler vision which began his career, this was a sign that the word of God should be within Ezekiel.

When the voice of the vision had bidden him speak and be of good courage, and a rushing wind had breathed the words, 'Blessed be the glory of the Lord from His place,' the air was filled with the whirling of the living wheels with their myriad eyes, and with the beating of the wings of the four creatures. As he stood, filled with dread at the thought of the task laid upon him, the wind seemed to raise him from the ground and carry him to Telabib. He found himself in his house, where for seven days he sat in silence, overwhelmed by this mysterious experience.

The full meaning of this wonderful vision is not very easy for us to understand. No doubt Ezekiel's ardent imagination had been unconsciously impressed with the pictures and the sculptures of strange winged creatures which were to be seen on some of the Babylonian buildings, and God used these impressions to convey this revelation. Certainly the details of the vision were full of meaning to Ezekiel, and we also can try to understand them.

I think the four faces of the winged creatures, or cherubim, as he calls them later, showed their

fourfold nature. That of a man stood for mercy and pity, of an eagle for vision, of a lion for courage, and of an ox for service. The wheels had their myriad eyes to show their living intelligence, ready to understand and obey. The throne of blue sapphire signified heavenly purity. The presence of God was revealed as the glory of one enthroned, Who would inspire His servant's inmost thought. Over all played the fierce fire of perfect holiness in which truth alone can live.

From this time Ezekiel heard the voice of God with perfect clearness. He learned that he was to be like the watchman of a city who stands upon his tower to scan the surrounding country and give the signal of alarm should an enemy appear.

Only a few days later he was bidden to go forth alone into the plain, and there again the awful vision filled the sky, and he fell upon his face, to be raised up once more by the power breathed into him. He was told to return to his house, and there abide in absolute silence until such time as God moved him to speak.

Think of this voiceless man dwelling among the people like one struck dumb. His silence was like a veil setting him apart from the ordinary

events of life. He took no share in the common intercourse of the community. His tongue was now consecrated to speak only the awful truths of God.

Ezekiel taught by visions such I have described to you, rather than by direct rebuke and appeal, or by object-lessons and picture-sermons such as Jeremiah used. Sometimes, however, he did adopt that prophet's methods, and the most important instance is the following.

He took one of the clay tiles so common in Babylon and drew upon it the picture each exile had always in his heart—the walls and towers of Jerusalem. Round about he drew the signs of a siege, with the battering-rams and other engines of attack, and when all was completed he set between himself and the picture an iron vessel. From this the people were to learn that since destruction alone could purify the city, their prayers for its safety were vain. God's purpose that it should be destroyed was fixed, and barred them like iron from any return.

A year later, as he sat one day in his own house with some of the elders about him, his eyes again beheld what was hidden from the others. He

was carried in spirit to Jerusalem, and walked unseen the streets he had thought to see no more. At the gate of the inner court of the Temple he saw the figure of an idol enthroned. Then the spirit who had borne him to the spot showed him a door in the court through which could be seen a hole, and bade him dig through the wall. When Ezekiel had obeyed, he found himself in a dim underground hall full of strange creeping creatures, where seventy of the elders of Jerusalem, amongst whom he recognized a son of Shaphan the scribe, were burning incense to idols. Next he was transported into the inner court of God's house, and there between the porch and the altar was a group of men who had turned their backs upon the holy place, and were worshipping the sun in the heavens.

Then the Presence whom Ezekiel always describes as 'the Glory of the God of Israel' commanded the unseen guardians of Jerusalem to draw near. Immediately there approached six angels bearing swords, and one in their midst with an inkhorn and a pen. This angel was commanded to go through the streets of the city and set a mark upon all who mourned and

repented. Thereupon the angel sword-bearers were commanded to slay those unprotected by this mystic sign; and in the vision this was done.

Now once more he beheld in the sky the forms he had seen by the River Chebar, and the angel with the inkhorn was told to go in between the whirling wheels and scatter brands upon Jerusalem from the fire that burned there. From this Ezekiel learned that the death of the wicked was not sufficient to do away with the evil of the city. Fire must consume it and cleanse it, and men with new thoughts must raise upon the ashes a new and holy Jerusalem.

One more shameful sight was disclosed. In the very porch of the Temple stood twenty-five of the leaders of the Jews plotting to break faith with Nebuchadrezzar and rebel against him. Even as Ezekiel watched he was moved to prophesy the total destruction of the city, and one of the conspirators fell dead where he stood. Seized with sorrow and misgiving, the prophet fell upon his face, imploring mercy on his people.

For the first time he heard a voice of comfort. God told him that His people should be once more gathered together from the lands in which they

were scattered. They should not return as of old, but with a new spirit. Their stony hearts should be taken away, and new hearts of flesh—that is, gentle and teachable—should be given to them. Then the cherubim lifted up their mighty wings, and Ezekiel returned in the spirit to his house in Telabib. And all he had learned in the vision he unfolded to his people.

It is easy to imagine with what awe they listened. The shattering rebukes of Amos, the tender appeals of Hosea, and the dramatic teaching of Jeremiah, were not more impressive than these weird visions of things afar off.

The sign, however, that impressed the exiles most of all was that which took from Ezekiel his last earthly joy. He had no children, but his wife was very dear to him, and one day he was told that she was to be taken from him. God said to him: ‘Son of man, behold, I take away from thee at a stroke the desire of thine eyes ; yet thou shalt neither mourn nor weep, neither shall thy tears run down. Sigh, but not aloud ; make no mourning for the dead ; bind thy head-tire upon thy head, and put thy shoes upon thy feet, and cover not thy lips, and eat not the

bread of man.' All this was the reverse of the custom of mourners.

Ezekiel had told the people in the morning of God's will, and in the evening his wife died. Even in his desolation he did as he had been commanded. Then came the neighbours, puzzled and awestricken, questioning him: 'Wilt thou not tell us what these things are to us that thou doest so?' And Ezekiel answered that for them all, the day of grief and horror was at hand. The Temple they loved would be profaned; those dear to them in Jerusalem would die, and in that day they too would pay no heed to custom, nor show any of the ordinary signs of mourning. Their grief would be too great. They too would sigh, but not aloud. Their sorrow would be too terrible for words or cries.

This was the last sign by which Ezekiel taught the exiles before the great calamity. Six months after the fall of Jerusalem, word of the disaster reached the exiles. Their last false hope was taken from them; their prophet was proved a true prophet. In that hour the silence which had so long sealed Ezekiel's lips, save in the moment when God used him as His messenger, was re-

moved. Now that the old ideas, like the ancient city itself, lay in ruins, he was free to teach them, to build up new and truer thoughts for their future, and for Jerusalem. The hardest part of his task was done. Happier his lot than that of Jeremiah, who to the end was prophet of woe.

CHAPTER XXIV

EZEKIEL, THE PROPHET OF HOPE

EZEKIEL xxxv—xxxii, xxxiv, xxxvii, xlvi.

IT was shown to Ezekiel that upon the very day on which his wife died, the armies of King Nebuchadrezzar closed round the walls of Jerusalem. In that long-ago age, when news had to be carried by messenger over rough country and through hostile people, it came very slowly. While he waited for his words to be confirmed, and still kept the silence which had been laid upon him, God unfolded to him His deep anger against those nations who had wronged His people, or exulted over their misfortunes.

First of all we are told of the little nations who were the neighbours of Judah. They had rejoiced at the Jews' misfortunes, and in particular the people of Edom had seized upon the land left vacant by the exiles, and taken it to be

their own. But Ezekiel makes it clear that God does not punish, as man so often does, merely for vengeance. He punishes that men may learn to be better and nobler, and to teach them that they are called to more splendid destinies than they have hitherto chosen. All through the book of this prophet there recurs, like the refrain of a beautiful song, 'that ye may know that I am the Lord.' It is when people come to know God that their sordid and selfish desires wither up and die, and new thoughts and aims arise in their place.

From the little countries Ezekiel turns to the great city of Tyre, at that time perhaps the strongest and richest in the world, built partly upon islands like Venice, her towers and pinnacles seeming to rise out of the sea in glory and magnificence. So successful was this city in all her enterprises, and in resisting her enemies, that the king of Tyre had begun to deem himself wise beyond the power of a mere mortal, with the wisdom of a god.

Ezekiel likens the city to a wonderful ship, with a great mast of cedar-wood and oars of oak, the very benches of ivory and box-wood,

the swelling sails of fine linen beautifully embroidered, and an awning of purple and blue. Proudly the beautiful ship takes the water, carrying her cargo of rich stuffs and precious metals, and with wise men for her pilots. But the wind tears out of the east, the great waves rise and sweep the deck, and, with a bitter cry from those who had exulted in the distresses of Jerusalem, the ship goes down, never to be seen again.

Imagine the faith and confidence required to utter this threat upon so mighty a power as Tyre. It is as though a man of some little, unimportant place which had been conquered by one of the great powers of Europe lifted up his voice to declare the overthrow of the British Empire, with its innumerable ships and far spread possessions. But Ezekiel had learnt that enduring strength is not shown by material wealth, but by the spirit that dwells within, the eternal fire. This prophecy was fulfilled in part not long afterwards, and hundreds of years later, in the days of the Romans, Tyre finally fell.

Then there was Egypt, with her vain promises to Jerusalem, who in the worst day of need had proved no better than a support of reed against

the Babylonians. Ezekiel compares Egypt to a great dragon in the midst of the River Nile, saying to himself: 'My river is mine own, and I have made it myself.' But just as a fish is caught with a hook and cast upon the shore, so God would drag this mighty creature from his home and fling him upon the parched soil of the wilderness, with all the little fishes sticking to his scales.

But even while Ezekiel sees that since justice had been done upon Jerusalem it must also be done upon the surrounding nations, he feels that the world would be a strange place without the great powers of Tyre and Egypt, with their wealth and magnificence and learning. As he pictures the dragon lying dead upon the desert, a prey to the wild beasts, he declares that the very heavens shall be darkened in the day of Pharaoh's overthrow.

And now came the messenger with the news of the fall of Jerusalem. All those who had doubted were forced at last to believe that the prophet had spoken truly. Their last false hopes were shattered. An awful despair fell upon them as they pictured their homes, to which they had so longed to return, lying open to the wind and

the rain, mere shattered walls, charred and blackened by fire. Nor was there a Temple round which they might pitch their tents, for that too lay in utter ruin, stripped and bare and wrecked. They felt themselves for ever cut off from God and from the land where alone they believed He could be worshipped.

Ezekiel was quick to see the dangers of such despondency. Now that the bonds of silence had been removed, he must teach them as never before, and show them that, though the sacred city and the sanctuary had perished, God still reigned, and could bring a new and wonderful good out of the evils that had befallen them.

If, in an unclean land where idolatry reigned supreme, they could no longer offer sacrifices, and if they could no more gather to the Temple, they still had the Sabbath—the day of rest. He bade them begin anew to keep every seventh day in a special sense holy to the Lord, and thus bear in perpetual remembrance the presence of God in the midst of His people. This keeping of the Sabbath may have been rendered the easier by the fact that the Babylonians appear to have observed every seventh day in some particular

fashion. Even though they only held the day to be an unlucky workday, they could the more readily understand the custom of the exiles.

But still the Jews felt utterly hopeless in their grief. Even if they kept themselves pure from idols and lived honestly and cleanly, how could such a weak remnant of people ever hope to regain their land, now utterly given up to the heathen? It was as though God had shut the door of hope upon them for ever, and they could only beat against it with weak, despairing hands. Their nation had become as powerless as the dead. It seemed vain to speak to them of the future.

In a vision God led Ezekiel out into a valley where upon every side lay bones, bleaching in the dry air. Then God asked him: 'Son of man, can these bones live?' and Ezekiel answered, 'O Lord, thou knowest.' Upon this he was bidden to prophesy, and to say: 'O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus saith the Lord God unto these bones: "Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live: and I will lay sinews upon you, and bring flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in

you, and ye shall live ; and ye shall know that I am the Lord.' ' Ezekiel obeyed, and when he had spoken there came a noise like the rending of the earth, and the bones came together, and were clothed with flesh and blood, and lay like a multitude of dead men. Then he was told to call upon the wind and to say : ' Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.' Immediately these lifeless men received breath, and rose to their feet like a mighty army. God told him to go to his people and teach them through this vision. There they sat lamenting, ' Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost ; we are clean cut off.' He must carry them this word of life, that God would raise them up even though they seemed like the dead, and take them back to their own land, and put a new spirit into them.

Can you imagine how those poor home-sick people would listen to such a message ? In other days Ezekiel had only broken silence to take their hopes away, but now he was bringing them such comfort as they scarcely dared to take to themselves. He had proved a true prophet of disaster ; might he not also prove a true prophet

in this beautiful hope for the future of the nation?

There was another difficulty which burthened the people, and which Ezekiel had to attack more than once. Even in Jerusalem, Jeremiah had heard them repeating a saying that had come to be quite a proverb—‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge’—and now they were repeating it again, sometimes with an air of mockery, but always with an underlying bitterness. They meant that the fathers committed the sin and the children received the punishment. They murmured that the Lord’s ways were ‘unequal.’

Now Ezekiel taught them very clearly something which they had never realized before—that while God was the God of the nation, and punished the nation for its sins, yet he was the God of each man and woman also, and judged them according to the manner of their lives. Moreover, a wicked man need not remain wicked: he could turn from his wickedness and repent, and then he would not be condemned. He taught that God never punishes in order to destroy. He has no pleasure in destruction.

He punishes to teach men to be better. This had been taught to the Jews before, but never so fully and clearly.

More and more they gathered round Ezekiel to hear him speak. He became quite a fashion, and on every side people could be heard discussing his eloquence and his ideas. A great heartsickness must have seized upon him when he realized this, for he cared nothing at all for his own fame, but only that he should make this little remnant of God's people understand the will of the Lord. One man would say to another, 'Come, I pray thee, and hear what is the word that cometh forth from the Lord'; but though they came to hear him speak, they went away and did not change their lives. God said: 'Lo, thou art to them as a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument: for they hear thy words, but do them not.'

How much God had to teach these exiles who were once more to build Jerusalem! He showed them, through His prophet, a great new idea concerning the leader of His people. This leader was not to be in the first place a great ruler or

soldier, but a shepherd who would care tenderly and with love for every sheep—a shepherd who would also be a prince of the line of David. God declared the leaders of the past to have been bad shepherds, who had only cared to devour the flesh and take the wool of the sheep committed to them. He said that He would demand the flock at their hands, and seek out the poor trembling sheep in all the places where they had taken refuge during the storm, when no one had cared for them. Here we have the tenderest and most beautiful picture of the Messiah, and one which our Lord loved above all others, and holds before us again and again. David had had such a thought in his heart when he sang, ‘The Lord is my shepherd,’ but it had never been put before the people as the very core of the love of God for His children.

Ezekiel has also left us a description of the new Jerusalem, rebuilt on the perfect plan of God’s will. This glorious city shall be called ‘Here is God.’ Within her walls shall be no sin at all, not because the laws are so severe and so just that sin dare not raise its head, but because the people have all received new hearts, and no

longer desire evil of any kind. The prince of the city is to be of the house of David, but since his subjects are sinless, and outside enemies are rendered powerless by God, he will not be much taken up with State affairs, but will till the ground like any other man. He will also receive tribute for the Temple, but beyond this there will be no taxes. But what does Ezekiel show us as the very heart of the State, without which it could not exist? He shows us the Presence of God Himself, unseen by the people, but spreading the light of His holiness throughout the city.

I think Ezekiel expected a real city of stone to be built according to his plan. That has never come to be. But in God's great Church of faithful people, among whom He is evidently present, something like Ezekiel's vision, only more remarkable, is seen.

In the last of all the wonderful visions of which he has left an account, Ezekiel was led by an angel to the gate of the perfect Temple to be raised upon the ruins of the old. Here all the old defects are done away, and all is beautifully ordered and arranged so that the worship may be full of reverence. It is here that God shall abide in the

midst of His adoring people. Ezekiel was at heart so true a priest that he dwelt with care and love upon every detail of the sanctuary. When he had seen all the courts, and the rooms for the priests, the angel led him out to the great door of the Temple, and behold, a strange thing !

From underneath the door burst a stream of pure limpid water, running eastwards through the dry barren plain of Judah towards the Dead Sea, in the brackish depth of which nothing can live. Stranger still, on those sterile banks, where nothing would grow, great trees had stretched their roots, their green branches spreading a pleasant shade.

The angel, who held a measuring line, went eastward by the river until he had measured a thousand cubits. Then, leading Ezekiel through the water, they found their feet were covered to the ankles. Again a thousand cubits, and when they crossed it the water was to their knees ; yet again, and the water had risen to their waists ; but when, a thousand cubits further on, they would have passed through a fourth time, it had become too deep—it would only have been

possible to swim. Without any tributaries this wonderful river of the power of God had grown in volume as it descended through that arid plain. The angel told Ezekiel that at length it would pour its purity into the waters of the Dead Sea, and so heal them that a multitude of fish should live there. Only the salt of the marshes should not be washed away, for upon those marshes Jerusalem depended for her salt.

In this most beautiful vision we are shown how the spirit of God brings life even to what seems hopelessly barren and dead. In that dreary plain hardly a green thing can exist; yet upon the face of the beautiful waters were mirrored great trees. In the Dead Sea life was unknown; yet, once purified by the living waters, life was to abound. And so in the lives of men and of nations, when the power of God streams in, living and free and beautiful, new thoughts, new faith, new deeds grow up like mighty trees, thrusting their strong roots down into the soil, unshakable and unspeakably lovely.

This is the picture of the Kingdom of Heaven, which after long centuries St. John depicted anew. He has shown us a river, the river of life,

and upon the banks the trees of life bearing twelve manner of fruits in their season.

With this Ezekiel closes his book. He had laid the foundations of the new Jerusalem in the souls of men.

CHAPTER XXV

THE PROPHET OF COMFORT DURING EXILE

ISAIAH **XL**, **XLI**, **XLIII—XLV**, **XLIX**, **LIII**, **LX**.

You are now to hear about the second part of the book which goes under the name of Isaiah. Some people believe that these last chapters, forty to sixty-six, were written by Isaiah in his old age, when he had retired from any active part in the life of Jerusalem. Most, however, of the learned students of the Bible now think that few, if any, of these chapters were by Isaiah. It is supposed that a great prophet of the exile who lived somewhere in Babylonia, as Ezekiel did, wrote many of them. Of this prophet we know nothing, not even his name.

It would not be easy for you to understand all the reasons which have convinced so many people, but you will wish to hear some of them. First of all, there is no name at the head of these later

chapters to tell us the author, while in various places in the earlier chapters Isaiah tells us himself that he spoke them. Next, all these later prophecies refer to a time one hundred and fifty years after Isaiah lived, yet the writer refers to many events as if they had already occurred. He even mentions Cyrus, the great king of Persia, by name. It is as if someone living in Oliver Cromwell's time had spoken to English people about Napoleon the Great, mentioning him by name.

We are quite sure that God could have enabled Isaiah to do this, but all the other prophets start with their own time when they speak about the future. It would have been very unusual if Isaiah, after speaking in the ordinary prophetic fashion all his life, were to make a leap forward a century and a half and speak as if he were living in Babylon. Besides, God always moved the prophets to speak in such a way as to be of immediate use to their listeners, and it is not easy to see how these chapters could have greatly helped Isaiah's hearers. The time was too far off for them to be much interested.

If a preacher in the time of Cromwell had

proclaimed what God would do for England in Napoleon's day, his hearers would scarcely have cared to listen, for there was so much to busy them, and they could not have imagined France a republic and then an empire. It would have been quite different if someone near the end of the eighteenth century had prophesied Napoleon's rise and fall. Everyone would then have listened eagerly, and might have learned much concerning God's ways with men.

But you will ask: 'Why, then, were these prophecies added on to Isaiah's, if not by him?' Remember that in those days books were written and not printed, and they were written on the skins of animals specially prepared, if it was desired to keep the books a long time. These prepared skins were expensive, and if an empty space was left when all the writings of a prophet had been copied, we can easily imagine that the scribe would fill up the remaining space with some similar prophecy, or with what appeared to be a kind of sequel to the first. This is why we find fragments of other prophets' writings in some of the books of the Old Testament although bearing only one name. Very likely the first

scribe would leave a little space or perhaps draw a line between the two writings, but a later copyist, not knowing what this meant, would write straight on as if all were by one person. This would scarcely explain, however, why such a long prophecy came to be tacked on to Isaiah's own. There is a better reason.

The last chapter of the first part of this book, which is the thirty-ninth, tells us of a visit paid to King Hezekiah by the ambassadors of Merodach-baladan, the king of Babylon. Hezekiah was greatly flattered by their visit, and showed them the few treasures he had left, as if these were the things of which he was most proud. When they were gone Isaiah came to him and asked: 'What said these men, and from whence came they unto thee?' Hezekiah answered a little proudly: 'They are come from a far country unto me, even from Babylon.' Then said the prophet: 'What have they seen in thine house?' And the king answered: 'All that is in mine house have they seen: there is nothing among my treasures that I have not shewed them.'

To Isaiah the king's action was boastful and foolish. It was like tempting these foreigners to

future pillage. There was something better in which to glory than this scanty hoard ; he might well have said, 'I am but a poor king, but the God of Judah is very great.' There flashed upon the prophet's vision the future disaster, and he said : ' Hear the word of the Lord of Hosts : "Behold, the days come that all that is in thine house, and that which thy fathers have laid up in store until this day, shall be carried to Babylon ; nothing shall be left," saith the Lord. And thy sons shall they take away ; and they shall be servants in the palace of the king of Babylon.'

Thus you see the part of the book which we are sure was Isaiah's closed with the prophecy of the captivity in Babylon. It was quite suitable, therefore, that a later prophecy concerning the deliverance from Babylon should be added here. It is quite possible that the unknown prophet himself may have done this. We know, at any rate, that he must often have read Isaiah, and he may have possessed a copy of his writings. Nothing could be easier and more natural than to add with his own hand the thoughts God had given him to those written by the earlier prophet, seeing that Isaiah had spoken of the future

punishment of Judah in Babylon, and had also promised that the faithful remnant would be cared for by God's kindness.

But whether these chapters really were by an unknown prophet or not makes no difference in their value to us. We love them, not because they were by any particular man, but because they prove themselves to us as the very word of God, which moves our hearts and feeds our trust and wakens our consciences. The only difference would be this. If Isaiah wrote them, his prophecy of Cyrus would be a hundred and fifty years before the time; if the unknown prophet, only ten or fifteen. But as you will soon hear, by far the most wonderful and beautiful thing in these chapters is the prophecy of the suffering and death of our Lord, which was not to happen for five hundred years after the death of Cyrus. This prediction was therefore equally remarkable in either case.

It seems, then, likely that there was an unknown genius in the exile, one of the greatest of God's lantern-bearers who is lost to our knowledge under the mantle of another. When did he write, and what special message did he bring?

Jeremiah had promised that after seventy years the Jews would return to their own land. But when fifty years had passed there seemed no gleam of hope that this prediction would be fulfilled. The great Babylonian empire still endured, and they were its slaves. True, Assyria had fallen less than a century before, and the oldest could remember with what a crash she fell. But she had been overthrown by the might of Babylon. How could Babylon be expected to fall too? Everywhere the Jews saw the gigantic towers, the great canals, the splendid temples of their conquerors. They still clung to belief in their own God, but how difficult to believe with the faith of Isaiah and Jeremiah that the Lord was the ruler over all nations, and would not forget to deliver His faithful folk.

The prophet therefore set himself first of all to bring comfort to his despondent fellow-countrymen. 'Comfort ye, comfort ye My people,' is his first tender word to them. And he sought to comfort them by reminding them that the Lord their God was the one and only God, beside Whom there was none else. He did not try to prove it to them, but declared it as the most

certain fact in the world. No one before him had spoken with such absolute certainty and with such complete contempt for the supposed gods of other people, however many mighty temples and gigantic idols they might have.

Hear him in his sublime description of God's majesty and aloneness: 'Behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance: behold, He taketh up the isles as a very little thing. And Lebanon is not sufficient to burn, nor the beasts thereof sufficient for a burnt offering. All the nations are as nothing before Him: they are counted to Him less than nothing and vanity. . . . "To whom then will ye liken Me, that I should be equal to him?" saith the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high, and see Who hath created these, that bringeth out their host by number: He calleth them all by name.'

The prophet did something more, however, than declare God's greatness. He poured contempt on the idols and the idol-makers and the idol-worshippers. Again and again, with scornful sarcasm, he described how the goldsmiths have to be called in to make an idol; how the

poorer man chooses a tree that will not rot, and employs a carver ; how the images had to be soldered into their places and secured by chains against a day of earthquake.

In one place he tells how the same tree goes partly to make a fire for warmth and for cooking, and partly to make a god ! These are his words : ‘A man burneth part of the tree in the fire : with part thereof he eateth flesh : he roasteth roast, and is satisfied : yea, he warmeth himself, and saith, “Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire” : and the residue thereof he maketh his god, even his graven image ; he falleth down unto it and worshippeth it, and prayeth unto it, and saith, “Deliver me, for thou art my god.”’

What now was to be the proof that the God of the Jews was the Almighty One ? This. The deliverer was at hand who would send them homeward from these endless plains to the mountains and the mountain city which they loved. Cyrus, the king of the Persians, was the Lord’s chosen one, His anointed to do this work. The prophet was bold to mention the very name of their rescuer.

For, on the one hand, Cyrus did not know the

Lord, had perhaps never heard of Him. That mattered not with the Almighty. Twice over God declared by His servant that Cyrus did not know Him, yet owed everything to Him. ‘For Jacob My servant’s sake I have even called thee by thy name: I have surnamed thee, *though thou hast not known Me.* I am the Lord, and there is none else, there is no God beside Me: I girded thee, *though thou hast not known Me.*’

On the other hand, not a few of the Jews shrank from the thought that any but a descendant of David was to bring them home from exile. But the prophet brushed this difficulty aside. The Almighty God could use anyone He pleased, and it was more wonderful to be delivered by a stranger than by one of themselves. Besides, He Himself was to be the real Deliverer. He Himself would guide them on the desert journey home, gentle and patient as a shepherd, carrying the lambs in His bosom and gently leading the mothers among the sheep.

Such words of comfort and gentle encouragement the prophet was ever speaking to his half hopeless listeners. God speaks through him as a mother speaks to her frightened child, saying

over and over again the same dear cheering words : ‘ Fear thou not ; for I am with thee : be not dismayed ; for I am thy God : I will strengthen thee ; yea, I will help thee ; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of My righteousness.’ Again : ‘ I the Lord thy God will hold thy right hand, saying unto thee, “ Fear not ; I will help thee. Fear not, thou worm Jacob, and ye men of Israel ; I will help thee,” saith the Lord, and thy redeemer is the Holy One of Israel.’ Yet again : ‘ Fear not, for I have redeemed thee : I have called thee by thy name ; thou art Mine.’ And yet once more : ‘ Fear not ; I am with thee.’ With such tender words, spoken to the nation as a whole, not to separate persons, God cheered His dispirited people, and bade them hope for the coming deliverance.

But God had not only words of good cheer for the exiled Jews. He desired also to teach them that they had a great work to do in the world. They were not to be great conquerors, but they were to reveal Him to all men. Therefore the prophet constantly refers to the remnant of His nation as ‘ The Servant of the Lord ’ who had a mission to fulfil. All through these chapters

there is promise after promise and command after command that they are to make known unto the Gentiles the one true God. And it is shown to them that their very sufferings had made them more fit to do this work. The deeper their suffering, the more wonderful their deliverance, and the greater praise to their Divine Deliverer.

So God speaks to the faithful : ' It is too light a thing that thou shouldest be My servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel ; I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be My salvation unto the ends of the earth.' And in many other passages the prophet sets forth the triumph of these later days, when the nations would gladly learn from the Jews and bring their offerings in return.

But it was very difficult for these heartbroken people to believe such good news. So the Lord in His mercy reasoned with them, and met each despairing cry with a fresh assurance. Each despondent saying which the prophet had heard as he went about among his fellow-exiles was put into the mouth of the nation or of their ruined city ; and to everyone there was the answer of an

ample promise. Here is one of these complaints and God's answer: 'Zion said, "The Lord hath forsaken me, and the Lord hath forgotten me." Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on her own son? Yea, these may forget, yet will not I forget thee. Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of My hands; thy walls are continually before Me.'

As the prophet thought of the work which the Servant of the Lord was to do, and of the sufferings such a servant might have to bear, he became convinced that the whole nation, even when purified and taught by pain, could not do this perfectly.

So he came to look more and more for One person Who would completely fulfil this task. Perhaps he had in his mind what Jeremiah did during the long years of agony before Jerusalem fell, when he stood almost alone, weeping, suffering, enduring, always faithful, almost always pitiful. Gazing into the future, the prophet began to see that One person would have to do this great work for God, suffering for other people's sins, and saving them by His sacrifice and never-failing goodness.

Then he drew the picture of the martyred Servant of the Lord in the fifty-third chapter. This was not to be a king, holy and triumphant, nor a priest, pure and majestic, but as it were a prophet, without a stain or a fault, yet enduring agony and shame for others' sakes. These are the exquisite words you should know by heart: 'He was despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from Him, and we esteemed Him not. Surely He hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed.'

If ever you see a mother wounded to the heart because her child has done grievous wrong; or a sister bearing uncomplainingly all the poverty and misery which her brother's ill-doing has brought on her, and eager only that he should become good; then you will understand a little what the prophet meant when he spoke of the Servant of the Lord suffering for the sins of all the people. But it is only when we turn our

eyes to the Lord Jesus, dying on the cross, praying for His murderers and ‘bearing our sins in His own body on the tree,’ that we see this ancient prophecy perfectly fulfilled. There is nothing in the whole of the Old Testament more moving and more amazing than this prophecy, so wonderfully realized.

We see, then, that all the horrors of the fall of Jerusalem, and the strivings and sufferings of the prophets, and the patience and punishments and love of God, were not in vain. At last a man had come to understand in some measure how God was going to save the world; at last a man had been able to receive God’s thought and give it to the people. Five and a half centuries had yet to pass before the Jews were ready to receive the very Son of God, but the light in this prophet’s lantern already shone so brightly that it was like the beginning of the Dayspring from on High. God was at last able to show His heart of pity to the world, for He had found a man who had suffered enough and loved enough to understand.

CHAPTER XXVI

HAGGAI AND ZECHARIAH, THE PROPHETS OF RESTORATION

EZRA I AND V. HAGGAI I AND II. ZECHARIAH I—VI, VIII AND IX.

AT length the time came when the kingdom of Babylon, having conquered many nations, was to suffer defeat. Nebuchadrezzar, one of the most famous kings in the history of the world, had ended his reign of forty-three years and was dead ; and under his successors the power of the Chaldeans, though still great, had dwindled. To the south-east lay Persia, then rapidly rising into prominence, and the great Persian king, Cyrus, had dreams of a world-wide empire. He was a wonderful general, and when at length he closed with the Babylonian forces the struggle was brief, and Babylon was added to his dominions.

This conquest was of untold importance to the Jews. During the seventy years of captivity

their numbers had increased, and Cyrus found a strong and vigorous colony in the midst of his new possession. They alone did not resent the defeat, and may even have given help to their conquerors, for Cyrus was evidently inclined to treat them well from the first.

The religion of Persia was very much finer than that of Babylon. The Persians, observing that the sun was the greatest natural force, took it to be a symbol of God, and set themselves to worship light. They made no idols, but kept burning in their temple the wonderful sacred fire fed by sweet-scented sandal-wood. It is said this fire has never been allowed to die out even for an hour.

They resembled the Jews in two ways. They believed that there was a supreme God, and also that He demanded truthfulness of His people. Cyrus, thus accustomed to bigger and deeper thoughts than most of his neighbours, was immediately interested on hearing of the God of Israel, and turned his attention to the best way of dealing with the Jews. He saw that not only could they not develop freely as a race where they were, but also that so long as they remained

exiles, they were no strength nor of any use to his empire. Looking southwards, he was already planning an attack on the great power of Egypt, and it occurred to him that by sending the Jews back to their own country he would thus have a grateful and friendly people placed at the very entrance to the land of the Pharaohs.

And so the words of the prophet Jeremiah and of Ezekiel came true. The Jews speedily received permission to return, and more than that: Cyrus not only decreed that the Temple should be rebuilt, but promised that he himself would help with money, so that the work might go forward prosperously and promptly. One other thing he did which filled the Jews with joy and gratitude. All the vessels which had been taken from the Temple by Nebuchadrezzar and placed in the temple of his own gods were restored. Mithredath, the treasurer, brought out the beautiful things they had hardly hoped to set eyes on again — plates and bowls of silver and gold, knives, and so forth — and committed them to the care of a prince of Judah. They were once more to be dedicated to the worship of the Lord.

Then began the great homeward march. No

less than fifty thousand Jews set out for Jerusalem, bearing not only the sacred vessels, but many other precious things which had been given to them. There were beasts of burden to carry their goods. It was a great company, and it is almost impossible to picture their joy. The brightest visions for the future were shining before them. In this time of testing they had been absolutely cleansed of idolatry, and they felt themselves forgiven by God and at peace.

Not all the Jews, however, returned at this time. For some reason which we cannot now discover a large number of them remained behind in Babylon. It was not that they had grown indifferent and found themselves too comfortable to care for the risks of the undertaking, for the time came when they showed themselves as loyal as any in their love for Jerusalem. Possibly Cyrus was anxious still to keep in his service in this newly conquered country some of these people who had such reason to be faithful to him. If this were so, you can imagine with what regret they said farewell to their fellows.

When the long, weary journey was accomplished, and the Jews came within sight of

the dear city of Jerusalem of which they had dreamed, I think a little chill must have come upon them. They had been told of the completeness of the destruction, and had even heard it described in detail by men who had seen it with their own eyes, and yet the dreadful reality came upon them with something like a shock. The walls were gone and the Temple absolutely wrecked. What an immense undertaking lay before them! So often the tale of Jerusalem's glories had been repeated, and now they had to face the task of building a yet more beautiful city.

Their first business was to set up the altar for burnt-offering, that they might once more offer sacrifices as their fathers had done of old. But even this was a work of some difficulty, for they speedily found themselves obliged to provide defence against wild beasts and unfriendly tribes, who alike broke in upon their unprotected homes.

And a still more serious difficulty arose. In the place of the Israelites who had been carried into exile by the Assyrians, Samaria had been peopled with heathen. Since they believed it to be unlucky not to worship the god of any land in which they dwelt, they set about learning what

they could of the God of Israel. This had not been difficult, for a few of the original inhabitants still remained, and, moreover, at their own urgent request the king of Assyria had despatched a Hebrew priest to instruct them. In this way, though they had not learned to be religious in the noblest sense, they had acquired part of the truth.

Now that they saw the Jews sending to Lebanon to procure cedar-wood for the rebuilding of the Temple, a great idea seized upon the imaginations of these Samaritans, as they had come to be called. They approached the Jews, and desired to join with them in the rebuilding of the Temple. When this was refused, their resentment passed all bounds, and they vented it in every way that occurred to them, perpetually hindering and hampering the Jews in their efforts. Soon, too—just a few years after their return—the great King Cyrus died, and was succeeded by a son who was as base as his father had been great.

The hearts of the Jews sank within them, for each day seemed only to bring forth fresh obstacles. Instead of the zeal with which they

had promised themselves to set to work upon the restoration of the Lord's House, selfish doubts crept in. They began to believe that the best plan would be to see to their own houses in the first place, and make them as secure and comfortable as possible. They continued to hew wood, but not now for the Temple. They built up their own houses, panelled the walls and made strong the ceilings, thinking all the while that when this was done there would be time enough for the other work. But, alas! drought and famine came upon them, making their condition more and more miserable. It seemed as though their pockets had holes, for instead of saving money, it leaked so fast away.

Darius, a great and powerful monarch who was to carry out the schemes of Cyrus, became king of Persia just at this time, and Zerubbabel, the grandson of Jehoiachin, continued to be governor of Judah on his behalf, and to pay him tribute, as had been the case since the return under Cyrus.

Perhaps it was because great things were already expected of this new king Darius that an aged prophet called Haggai, who had seen with

his own eyes the former glories of Jerusalem, began to speak to the people. The book that bears his name is one of the two shortest in the Old Testament, but though the words are few and are not full of the exquisite poetry we find in the greatest prophets, he said just the very thing his people needed most. No prophet can do truer work than this.

He condemned them because all these seventeen years they had left their Temple unbuilt, content instead to adorn their own homes. He granted that things had gone very hard with them, but was not this a punishment for their own want of faith? They ought to consider that whereas God had led them back according to His promise, they had been too easily frightened by difficulties, and had failed to perform their part.

It was upon a golden autumn day that he began to speak, when the land was breathless for water. The people, though saddened by the failure of the harvest, could not but listen to this true, faithful old man, who was seeking to rouse their old enthusiasm. He bade them, in the name of the Lord, go up into the mountain and hew

the beautiful strong trees, and bring the wood into Jerusalem and begin building at once. Among his listeners were Zerubbabel, the prince and ruler, and Joshua the high priest—the first high priest of whom we hear—and these two led the people in their efforts to obey the prophet. With newly kindled zeal they immediately put their hands to the work.

A few weeks later Haggai spoke again, this time to encourage and strengthen them in their undertaking. He brought them the word of God that this Temple they were raising to His honour should yet be glorified, and their enemies rendered powerless to do them ill. His last words were to inspire Zerubbabel with the thought of the high destiny to which Haggai believed the Lord would call this prince. It almost seemed to the aged prophet, as he saw the people hurrying to perform the will of God, headed by a descendant of the great King David, that the golden days of the Messiah described by Ezekiel were about to dawn upon them.

Hardly had his trembling old voice died into silence than his message was taken up and pressed home to the hearts of the people by

another and quite young prophet, called Zechariah.

Rapid progress was being made, for Darius had discovered the written decree of Cyrus which declared that the Jews should receive help towards building their Temple, and was sending the much-needed contributions ; and though the Jews were still beset with fears of their enemies, the thought of the future once more began to brighten.

In the Book of Zechariah we find a new order of things. With the olden prophets God had almost always dealt quite directly—only occasionally by means of visions which needed interpretation. But to Zechariah truth was most frequently presented in a vision, with an attendant angel to explain the meaning. In fact, vision becomes with him a kind of parable.

In the early chapters we find no fewer than eight visions following one upon another, setting forth God's will and purpose for His people and judgment upon their enemies.

The first of these came to him as he walked one night in a copse of myrtle-trees close to the city. Suddenly, he beheld four horsemen,

whom he soon perceived to be angels. Although darkness had fallen, he could even discern the colour of the horses—two red, one sorrel, and one white. Turning to an angel standing at his side, Zechariah asked: 'O my Lord, what are these?' and the angel answered: 'These are they whom Jehovah hath sent to walk to and fro upon the earth.' When questioned by the angel, the four horsemen declared with one voice: 'We have walked to and fro through the earth, and, behold, all the earth sitteth still, and is at rest.' Then the angel cried to God Himself, asking how long before there should be mercy for Jerusalem, seeing that His anger had been poured upon the city for seventy years. And the Lord answered with words of comfort, saying that His house should be built, and that already days of prosperity were at hand.

By means of this vision Zechariah taught courage to the people, who still went in fear and trembling about their work because of their distrust of the surrounding nations. Not only was this a moment of peace upon the earth, but their efforts should be blessed.

As the people raised the walls of the Temple,



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stone by stone, their thoughts often turned to the ruined walls of the city, which as yet they had not begun to rebuild. For their encouragement Zechariah received another vision. As he stood among the myrtles, he raised his eyes to Jerusalem, and saw a man with a line measuring the length and breadth of the city, as though with the purpose of rebuilding the walls to make it, as of old, a mighty fortress. But now another angel appeared and cried to the first, bidding him declare to the prophet that the perfect Jerusalem of God's thought should be without walls like a village, because of the multitude of men and of cattle therein. God Himself would be their defence. ‘‘For I,’ saith the Lord, ‘will be unto her a wall of fire round about, and I will be the glory in the midst of her.’’

Ezekiel had already spoken of God dwelling in the midst of the city. Here we find that God shall also be the rampart—not a wall of stone which might be cast down, as had been done already by the Chaldeans, but a wall of fire through which not the strongest enemy could pass.

In the last of these eight visions Zechariah

saw a strange sight, for from between two mountains which seemed to glow like brass came four chariots, the first with brown horses, the second with black, the third with white, and the fourth with grey. He asked: 'What are these, my lord?' and the angel replied that these were the four winds of heaven come forth to do the will of the Lord. The black horses go north, the white west, the grey south, and the brown to walk up and down upon the earth. Here we have a picture of the vast and illimitable power of the Almighty King to whose bidding the great winds are subject.

And now Zechariah was bidden to go to a certain house in Jerusalem to meet with some Jews from Babylon who had been sent with contributions of silver and gold, so as to help on the work with their wealth, if they might not do so with the labour of their hands. God told the prophet to take of the silver and gold and make crowns. And here there is some confusion, owing either to the carelessness of a scribe or to a wilful alteration made in after-years; for we are told that the crowns are to be set upon the head of Joshua, who was the high priest, as you

will remember, whereas both Haggai and Zechariah plainly looked to Zerubbabel as the real king of the nation, though he only held his power from Darius. It seems clear that the crowns were to be set on the head of Zerubbabel, but that Joshua was to be at his right hand ; and the prophet tells us that ‘the counsel of peace shall be between them.’

This is the picture of the ideal State, where God’s anointed king, representing the government, and His high priest, representing religion, act in perfect unity and govern according to the Divine will. And yet we have a sense of loss. There is no place for the prophet or seer. Jeremiah, with his wider vision, could not have forgotten him.

In the rest of this book there are two famous descriptions, one of the gladness of the city of the future, the other of the gentleness of the coming King. Ezekiel had called the new Jerusalem ‘Here is God !’ Now we find a new name, for Zechariah calls it ‘City of Truth. He says of it : ‘There shall yet old men and old women dwell in the streets of Jerusalem, every man with his staff in his hand for very age. And

the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in the streets thereof.' Can you imagine with what longing the people must have listened? In the lovely City of Truth the terror of wild beasts and treacherous enemies would cease to exist. The men and women would no more be cut off suddenly by the sword, or slowly through famine. So safe, so happy would they be that the old and the young who could not defend themselves should go freely, and without trembling, through the streets.

The other description is found in the beautiful lines heralding the coming of the Messiah, which both St. Matthew and St. John quote in their Gospels: 'Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold thy King cometh unto thee; He is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, even upon a colt the foal of an ass.' Here again was a thought of peace for the city that had suffered so bitterly. The great Anointed is not pictured as a warrior coming in His chariot with horses, but upon the beautiful Eastern ass, used only on peaceful occasions. So strongly was this thought present to the prophet that he lays

emphasis upon it,—the ass shall be no more than a colt.

And so these two prophets, the one old and the other young, with their strong views upon the duty of the moment, and with their thoughts of the anointed ruler to come, fired the tired, disappointed people to perform their task. The walls of the second Temple rose strong upon the ruins of Solomon's, and the work went steadily to completion. And this work was a very necessary one. By its completion the outward sign of the presence of God in their midst was ensured, and the message of the Jews to the world was preserved in safety.

CHAPTER XXVII

MALACHI AND JOEL

MALACHI I—IV. JOEL I—III.

WHEN at length the Temple had been rebuilt through the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah, the Jews in Jerusalem looked for great prosperity. At last, they said to themselves, at last God will bless us richly, and the promises of unfading prosperity will come true. But they were sorely disappointed. They had to struggle along very much as before. It is true that the Persian rulers did not ill-treat them, but they took little notice of them. Zerubbabel had been crowned by the two prophets, but he had never been a real king, just an insignificant governor ; and he had no successor. The neighbouring tribes did not dare to persecute them, but they were always unfriendly and ready to take advantage of them. Besides, most of the people were very poor. All

began to lose heart. Their bright dreams of glory and comfort and honour faded away.

Have you ever set your hopes on a holiday excursion, and longed that the day should be fine? The previous evening, when you looked at the weather-glass, it stood at 'set fair.' In the early morning, when you wakened for a moment the sun was shining brightly. Everything promised well. But when you rose later, and rushed to the window to look out, the sunshine was gone, the sky overcast, and a cold wind blowing. There was no rain to prevent you setting out, and you made the excursion as it had been planned, but the weather never brightened; it was too chilly to sit down; nothing looked beautiful under the heavy clouds. You felt the day to be a miserable failure. Long before the evening you were listless and low-spirited. It seemed scarcely worth while to play a game or to look at the noble old ruin you had come to see.

The Jews had fallen into just such a mood. Stern persecution, a great disaster, they could have endured better. But the pettiness of their life and of their difficulties and of their duties depressed them. It was the day of mean things.

Their city was mean, without walls, like a little village ; their quarrels were mean, whether with their neighbours or among themselves ; even their Temple seemed to them rather a poor affair after all. Then their thoughts and their acts grew mean too. Those who did evil sinned meanly, and such as still kept themselves faithful were constantly grumbling against God.

This was the state of the people when Ezra the scribe came from Babylon to be their teacher, fifty years after the rebuilding of the Temple. Ten years later came Nehemiah, and with his splendid energy he got the wall rebuilt, and introduced various reforms. These two leaders were not unaided. About the time that Ezra began his work, God sent the prophet Malachi ; and after Nehemiah's labours were finished, another prophet, called Joel, stepped forth to be a witness for God. Of these two prophets you must now hear.

I. Malachi, the Prophet against Mean Sins.

Malachi means ' My messenger,' and is thought by many to be the proper name of the prophet, just as ' Angelicus ' has sometimes been used as

a Latin name, or ‘Angel’ as an English name, each meaning ‘heavenly messenger.’ But most students now think that the book at first appeared without a name, and that the opening verse should be translated, ‘The burden of the word of the Lord by My messenger,’ not ‘by Malachi.’ Perhaps the author preferred to be nameless, since he had to attack both those in authority and also the common people.

Others suppose that it was Ezra himself who wrote the book. If that be the case, he may have thought that it would do more good if the people did not know it was from his hand. He was constantly teaching them by word of mouth out of the Book of Deuteronomy. But it matters little to us whether we can decide on the prophet’s name or not. His book is quite clear without knowing any personal details about himself. It is not like the Book of Hosea, which we could not understand without having learnt a little of his life.

No sooner do you begin to read this book than you feel how different it is from the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel, or even from those of Hosea and Amos and Micah. The

warm feeling and the splendid eloquence of the older prophets are wanting. It does not sound like a mother appealing tenderly to her child, or a great preacher speaking to a multitude, but rather like a schoolmaster teaching a disobedient and tiresome class.

The first words of the prophecy are: “I have loved you,” saith the Lord’; just this bare statement. Jeremiah said: ‘I have loved thee with an everlasting love, therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee.’ We read in the Book of Isaiah: ‘Thou hast been precious in My sight and honourable, and I have loved thee.’ This prophet gives us only the shortest of sentences, and then immediately allows himself to be interrupted, for he goes on: ‘Yet ye say, “Wherein hast Thou loved us?”’ All through his book, he continually stops short to answer some similar complaining thought. This may have been the most effective way of stopping the mouth of the grumblers, both among the evil and the good, but it was not nearly so noble a way as that of the earlier prophets. They poured forth a flood of thought and feeling like a mighty river, and only occasionally stopped to answer objections.

When the prophet was challenged to prove God's love to the people, he used what will seem to you rather a curious argument. He asked the Jews to compare their lot with that of the Edomites. These descendants of Esau came from the same stock as the children of Jacob, but they had now been displaced for ever from their mountain home. The uplands of which they were so proud had been ravaged, and belonged henceforward to their conquering foe. The Jews, on the other hand, after being taken into exile, had been restored to their country.

This seems to us a little like saying, 'Be happy, because another, who was your enemy, is much worse off than you are.' Yet it may have been the argument which appealed most directly to those mean-minded Jews, for we know that Edom's hatred and cruelty had seemed to them unbearable, and indeed almost their worst affliction.

But the prophet's message had more to do with the sins of his nation than with the Divine love. First, he attacked the priests for neglecting the Temple services and sacrifices. Apparently they took no trouble to secure that their offerings

were of the best, and were presented in a seemly and reverent way. Diseased animals, only fit for slaughter, and blemished animals which could not be sold, were offered on God's altar. No wonder that one zealous for His honour was angry. The priests would not have dared to treat the Persian governor in this way. What they gave to him must be choice and good. But they acted as if the leavings—what nobody else would take—were good enough for God.

The prophet was filled with loathing at such hypocrisy, and cried out in God's name to cease sacrifices altogether: 'Oh that there was one among you that would shut the doors of the Temple, that ye might not kindle fire on My altar in vain.'

The priests were much to blame for another reason. They should have been the teachers of the people. It was the prophet's task to warn and guide the nation at a crisis, but the priest's business to give regular instruction to the people, just as ministers of religion do now. 'The priest's lips should keep knowledge,' wrote the prophet, 'and the people should seek the law at his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of

Hosts.' Instead of this, the priests were lazy and ignorant, and did not trouble to study the law of God as given to them in the Book of Deuteronomy. When they did teach, they taught wrongly.

Unhappily, while the people viewed the tricky, indolent priests with contempt, they themselves failed in what was their duty. The prophet boldly called them 'robbers of God.' When they indignantly asked, 'Wherein have we robbed God?' the answer came sharp and clear: 'In tithes and offerings. Ye are cursed with the curse, for ye rob Me, even this whole nation.' It was then the understood rule that a tenth of all a man's gains should be set apart for God's service —to keep up the Temple sacrifices, to pay the priests, and so forth. But the people had been holding back much of the tithes, always complaining of hard times. 'It is your meanness which makes the times hard,' was the prophet's answer. These are his often-quoted words: 'Bring ye the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be meat in Mine house, and prove Me now herewith,' saith the Lord of Hosts, "if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and

pour you out a blessing that there shall not be room enough to receive it.”

I think it must strike you that such teaching is very different from that of Amos and Micah. In their days the worship was idolatrous, but the worshippers did bring the best they could get to the altars. When the prophets condemned such worship, they said quite frankly that sacrifices were not important at all, and they did not mention tithes. You remember how we read in the Book of Micah: ‘What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God ?

But this prophet laid great stress on the sacrifices, and the regular payment of the Temple dues. This was because of the teaching of the Book of Deuteronomy and possibly of Leviticus, which were then probably much in use among godly people. In these writings great stress is laid on such religious duties. Besides, during the exile the Jews had been deprived of the Temple services; they had therefore become of more value in the eyes of the prophet, and of those like-minded.

It was a poorer, narrower view of religion to

set forth, but we can all feel that the prophet was right in one thing. Whatever worship and service we bring to God must be honest and thorough. When we pray, whether for a short or a long time, we must put our hearts into our prayer. God does not want us to feel that we must pray for a certain number of minutes every day, and be uneasy if we spend a shorter time, as if we had so much taskwork to do, a certain number of coins to pay. But, on the other hand, if we are careless about prayer when we get ready for the day or prepare for sleep at night, acting as if it were the least important thing while all the time we speak of it as the most important, then we are falling into the same snare as the Jews, and are becoming hypocrites. Religious hypocrisy was the sin our Lord most frequently and most severely rebuked among the people of His day, and here we see the beginning of it.

It is when the prophet speaks of God's coming judgment that we hear the accents and the tones of the older prophets. He proclaims a day when the Lord will suddenly come to His neglected Temple, sending His messenger before Him.

Then the Lord will show Himself to be like the glowing fire of the refiner of silver, like the biting acid of the cleanser of cloth. ‘Who may abide the day of His coming?’ cries the prophet; ‘who can stand when He appeareth?’ Next he launches into threatenings against every kind of wickedness. ‘The Lord will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, and the adulterers, and the false swearers; against those that oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger from His right, and fear not Me.’ There spoke the voice of the noblest prophecy. It is no longer a question of tithes, but of the great essential duties of justice and mercy and humility. It is as if Micah had come to life again.

But not only did the wicked need to be rebuked; the faithful needed to be braced. They were always complaining that it was of no use to try to be good. This is a specimen of their talk: ‘It is vain to serve God: and what profit is it that we have kept His charge, and that we have walked mournfully before the Lord of Hosts? And now we call the proud happy; yea, they tempt God and are delivered.’

It sounds like the whimpering of a petted child. The prophet sternly declares that the difference between the righteous and the wicked will soon be seen. ‘“ For behold the day cometh, it burneth as a furnace ; and all the proud and all that work wickedness shall be stubble, and the day that cometh shall burn them up,” saith the Lord of Hosts.’ It is an affrighting picture : the roaring flames ; loose, short straw for fuel, consumed as soon as it touched the fire ; only a handful of grey ashes left to be trodden into the ground.

But there are gleams of tenderness in the severe words of this schoolmaster-prophet. When he thinks of the sadness of the humiliated, disappointed people, he tells them that the Lord has heard their mournful whispers. Every moment He has listened, and they are not forgotten. This is the beautiful consolation sent to them. ‘A book of remembrance was written before the Lord for them that feared Him, and thought upon His name.’ If life is dark to them just now, the thick night, lit with lurid fires of judgment, will soon pass. Then will come the dawn, and such a dawn ! ‘Unto you that fear

My name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in His wings, and ye shall go forth and gambol as calves of the stall.'

Have you ever watched the coming of the day on some misty morning in a country place? As the sun rises, rays shoot out to the right and left, like feathers of light making great wings: the mists are broken; the dull sodden earth grows bright; and the beasts, loosed from their stalls, leap and play in the new sunshine, full of joy at the freedom of the opening day. Such blitheness God's faithful tempted ones would know when the final judgment was over.

But though the prophet did his best both to warn and to cheer the people, he felt that he was not strong enough for the task. His thoughts turned back to Moses, whose law was in their hands, and to Elijah, the unflinching prophet of God's presence. They were mightier men than he. His last words were a command to give heed to Moses' teaching and to look for another Elijah, who would be the immediate herald of the great and terrible day of the Lord. It seemed to him that there was no room for any more prophets, nor much hope that more would come. He

looked back, not forward, and expected the thunder-voice of God's most fearless messenger to be heard once more as a last warning ; only in this way could he hope that mean family quarrels and base sins would be ended, and the land be saved from a final curse. The nameless prophet ends his book with something like a sigh of failure.

II. Joel, the Prophet of the Day of the Lord.

Some little time after Nehemiah's work was finished in Jerusalem the prophet Joel issued his prophecies there. For long he had pored over the sacred writings of his race. They had been carefully collected and arranged during the exile, when anything connected with the past of the nation became very important in their eyes. In particular he read the works of the prophets from Amos onwards, and marked where their predictions had not been fulfilled. He read these books so often that he remembered many passages word for word. Again and again, in his own short volume, we find him quoting words and phrases which these former messengers of God had used.

A great calamity to the little community in

Jerusalem moved him to become a prophet. This was the conquest of the country, not by an army of warriors, but a vast host of locusts. Swarms of these insects visited Palestine not infrequently, but on this occasion they came in such multitudes as to leave every garden and vineyard and tree stripped and bare. The people suffered terribly. Very little trade had as yet begun to flow into Jerusalem, not long risen from its ruins. They depended almost wholly on agriculture for their living. So great was the destitution that the meal-offering and the drink-offering of wine could not be offered in the Temple.

Joel gives an amazing description of the locusts, picturing them as a mighty army of destroyers, every one doing his work and going irresistibly forward. First, they fall upon the fertile fields around the city. ‘A nation is come up upon my land, strong and without number: his teeth are the teeth of a lion, and he hath the jaw teeth of a great lion. He hath laid my vine waste and barked my fig-tree; he hath made it clean bare and cast it down: the branches thereof are made white. Be ashamed, O ye husbandmen; howl,



FROM THE FRIEZE BY JOHN SARGENT, R.A., IN
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O ye vinedressers, for the wheat, and for the barley, for the harvest of the field is perished.'

Travellers who have seen an invasion of locusts tell us that this description is not exaggerated. Though comparatively small insects, only an inch or two long, their jaws are powerful. They not only devour the grass, and the leaves and twigs, but even the bark of the smaller trees, leaving them stripped and white, mere skeletons, ready to die. And it is impossible to turn the vast hordes back. If ditches are digged, they are soon filled, and the locusts march across the bodies of their comrades. If fires are lit, the swarms go past and through them, and though millions die, millions more press forward. It is easy to kill a thousand ; it is impossible to stay the onward course of hundreds of thousands.

The prophet goes on to describe how they came up to the city and filled the streets and pressed into the houses. 'They run like mighty men ; they climb the wall like men of war ; and they march every one on his ways, and they break not their ranks. They leap upon the city ; they run upon the wall ; they climb up into the houses ; they enter in at the windows like a thief.'

Locusts come in such masses that at a distance they look like drifting showers of snowflakes, and when they pass overhead they are like a mist obscuring the sun and the stars. Joel added this touch to his picture, and declared that 'the sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining.'

To make the misery still greater, drought followed the locusts. The seeds rotted under the clods and the new pasture failed. This is his pathetic description of the misery of the starving, thirsty animals: 'How do the beasts groan! The herds of cattle are perplexed. Yea, the beasts of the field pant unto Thee, for the water-brooks are dried up, and the fire hath devoured the pastures of the wilderness.'

What could it all mean? Only one thing—the drawing near of the day of the Lord. He quoted Zephaniah's description, and wrote: 'A day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness.' Then he added a wonderful touch of his own, 'like the dawn spread upon the mountains.' When the sky is heavy and overcast in a mountain country, and the dark blue hills almost meet the fierce black clouds, a pale

streak of dawn touching the top of the range only makes the general gloom more terrible to behold. That was the picture in the prophet's mind—some great calamity, lowering, threatening, burdening, so that it was scarcely possible to breathe.

Was it not possible to escape this terrible day ? At least the attempt must be made. Everyone must repent—the worst and the best, drunkard and priest. He sounded the alarm-cry : ‘ Blow the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the old men, gather the children, even the mere babes : let the bridegroom go forth out of his chamber and the bride out of her closet.’ Everybody, everybody must gather to the great act of repentance. The priests must weep and pray, the people fast and mourn. And it must be real repentance. ‘ Rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God,’ he cried. There was still hope, hope of deliverance from this present evil and from future woes. He fell back on the great declaration made to Moses, and narrated in the Book of Exodus : ‘ The Lord is gracious and

merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness.'

Joel's words were not in vain. The final disaster was averted. The Lord had pity on His people. This was His answer to their cries of repentance: 'Behold, I will send you corn and wine and oil, and ye shall be satisfied therewith.' The locusts were to be driven into the seas, the Dead Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, and should die in such multitudes that the shores would reek with their decaying bodies. Then the prophet broke into a joyous song of the future, when there would be harvests unbelievably good, and the barns and threshing-floors and wine-vats would overflow with abundance. Joy, joy, joy is his cry. 'Fear not, O land; be glad and rejoice. Be not afraid, ye beasts of the field. Be glad then, ye children of Zion, and rejoice in the Lord your God.' 'My people shall never be ashamed, is God's repeated message. 'Ye shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the Lord your God, and there is none else.'

But Joel did not stop with this promise of a land of never-ceasing fruitfulness. He was too truly a man of God to think that all would be well

with his nation if every earthly trouble was removed, and there was always abundance to eat and drink.

As he saw the day of the Lord shining before him, he was sure that every Jew would then worship God aright. Perhaps Moses' noble words were in his mind, 'Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets,' for he described a blessed time when everyone should be a seer and a prophet, old and young, maidens as well as youths, the very ploughmen and house-servants. These are his well-known words: 'I will pour out My Spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions; and also upon the servants and handmaids in those days will I pour out My Spirit. And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth, blood, and fire, and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and the terrible day of the Lord come. And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be delivered.'

The Jewish rabbis in later centuries often let

their imaginations run riot in descriptions of the wonderful fertility of their land when the Messiah should come, but they did not know how to interpret this promise of the Spirit. It was St. Peter, our Lord's Apostle, who saw on the day of Pentecost that this prophecy was being fulfilled.

He proclaimed Joel as the prophet of the Holy Ghost, when he quoted these words in his first great speech in Jerusalem.

We could almost wish that Joel had said no more, but he felt that he had more to say. Remembering the oppressions and the cruelties wrought by many nations, he felt that the day of the Lord had to be the day of judgment as well as the day of mercy and outpouring of the Spirit. This is how he saw it. In a valley near Jerusalem, which he called the Valley of Jehoshaphat—that is, 'The Lord judgeth' valley—all the nations were to be gathered together. There the Lord would plead with them on behalf of His long-persecuted people, especially with Tyre and Sidon and Philistia. There vengeance awaited them, if they did not repent and yield: exile for those who had exiled, slavery

for all who had sold into slavery, cruelty for those who had been cruel.

The nations were to come fully armed, every available weapon in use; even the ploughshares should be beaten back into swords and the pruning-hooks straightened into spears. It was to be war to the death or final, complete submission. That was to be the deciding day. 'Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision!' cried the prophet; 'for the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision!'

What would the fateful choice be? It seemed to Joel that the nations would not change; that they were habit-bound in evil; that only Judah, the sole remaining representative of Israel, could be blessed. Egypt was to be a desolation and Edom a wilderness. Only Jerusalem and Judah and all who fled to the holy city could be blessed.

It is a dark picture, though bright for his own folk; very different from the great promise of Isaiah that Assyria and Egypt should be equally blessed with Israel, because equally dear to God; very different, too, from the picture given us in the Book of Jonah, where the Lord was seen to be pitiful even to the babes and cattle of the re-

pentant heathen. Joel was the prophet of the Holy Ghost, but I fear that he thought that 'all flesh' only meant 'all Jews.' He did not understand that of the multitudes in the valley of decision throughout the centuries, many, many millions would decide for God, and become citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem, sharing in its endless joy.

It was to save Judah from this narrower view of God's pity and of their own glory that the Book of Jonah was written.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE STORY OF JONAH

2 KINGS XIV. JONAH I—IV.

AT a time when Palestine was being cruelly used by Syria, and the people were in despair, we read in the Second Book of Kings that a prophet called Jonah arose in Galilee, declaring that deliverance was at hand. His prophecy came true, for Jeroboam II. drove the enemy from his borders, and won back the towns that had been taken from the kingdom. Beyond this, and the fact that the prophet's father was Amittai, we are told nothing. We think he was not one of the writing prophets, for the actual words of his prophecy are not preserved for us. It was many long years after his death that this little book which bears his name came to be written.

Perhaps you have heard his story so often that you feel you do not care to hear it again. It

was one of the first that was ever told to you. And yet, though you could repeat every little detail of the story, do you after all understand its beautiful meaning? Of all the wonderful poems of the Old Testament this is one of the most wonderful, not only because of the simple grandeur of the words, but because of the great truth that shines out from it. It brought before the Jews not merely a truth they had never seen, but one they were exceedingly unwilling to see, and made it so plain that they were forced to understand.

We are ignorant of the name of the author, and do not know when and how he lived, but we can learn quite certainly the most important things about him. He must have lived very close to God, or he never could have seen and declared what he did about the love of God for the world: he was also a man with a great soul and a great mind, able to think wide and beautiful thoughts. This is the story he tells us, which you think you know so well.

The word of God came to the prophet Jonah, bidding him journey to Nineveh to warn that vast capital of the Assyrian empire that her fall was at hand because of the sins of her people.

Instantly there flashed into Jonah's mind a thought that was intolerable to him. The Jews had suffered for generations at the hands of the heathen, and in particular of the Assyrians. Their God had been mocked, their homes burned, their wives and children put to death before their eyes. Their most ardent prayer that rose to heaven night and day was for vengeance upon their oppressors. So terrible had been the anguish through which they had passed that they could not believe that a God of justice would, in the end, withhold the answer they craved.

But Jonah knew that God was not only just, but far more, merciful and tender towards all those who turned to Him in repentance. He saw that it was possible that Nineveh would listen to the warning and repent, and would be reconciled to God.

He could have seen Nineveh devoured by flames without any sorrow. He would have looked on with an awful joy at the judgment that was meting out a just reward to the people who had devastated his country. But the thought of Nineveh forgiven, and allowed to stand, was unbearable. Were not the Jews God's chosen

race, singled out by Him to receive His truth and His special blessings? How, then, could He be on terms of love and forgiveness with His people's enemies?

Nineveh lay eastward, and in his anxiety to fly from the duty that was odious to him he hurried to the west. He went down to the seaport of Joppa, and took ship for Tarshish. When the ship was well on her way a hurricane swept the sea, threatening to wreck her. The sailors, who were heathen, prayed each to his own god, and then began to cast their merchandise overboard to lighten the ship. But Jonah, wearied with his journey and the burden of his thoughts, had gone apart, and through all the crash and thunder of the waves lay sound asleep.

The shipmaster roused him, saying: 'What meanest thou, O sleeper? Arise, call upon thy God, if so be that God will think upon us, that we perish not.' Then, as the sea grew no whit the calmer, conviction grew that someone on board was pursued by the anger of a great spirit. 'Come,' said the sailors, 'and let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil is upon us.' They did so, and God's finger



D. Anderson.

JONAH.

AFTER A STATUE, PROBABLY DESIGNED BY RAPHAEL, IN THE CHURCH OF
SANTA MARIA DEL POPOLO, ROME.

touching this game of chance, the lot fell upon Jonah.

Now, although these men were heathen, and Jonah was a Jew, no thought of personal enmity or selfish fear entered into their minds. In their common danger everything that was ungenerous vanished. In answer to their questions Jonah told his story, and how he was flying from the face of God. Then said they: 'What shall we do unto thee that the sea may be calm unto us?' And Jonah, seeing that he was, as ever, in the hand of God, utterly unable to hide himself, and only bringing danger upon his fellows, answered: 'Take me up and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you: for I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you.'

The sailors were unwilling to do this, and rowed hard against the wind, hoping to bring the ship into harbour without sacrifice of life. Only when this hope failed did they take Jonah and cast him into the sea. And then a strange and wonderful thing happened, for we are told that a monstrous fish swallowed Jonah, and for three days and three nights he was shut up in darkness.

Perhaps you have asked yourself whether such a thing is possible, whether in all the great oceans of the earth there exists a creature able to swallow a man. Now, while it is very certain that everything is possible to the power of God, it is quite likely that the writer of this book was using an expression which you will find in other parts of the Bible. You will remember that Ezekiel speaks of Egypt as a dragon living in the River Nile, and earlier still Jeremiah describes Nebuchadrezzar as a great fish who had swallowed Israel, but at the word of God would be obliged to 'bring forth out of his mouth that which he had swallowed up.' This writer wishes to make plain how utterly Jonah was swallowed up by disaster in his attempt to escape from God.

Now, indeed, instead of making an escape, Jonah was the most miserable of captives. Having cast off God, God Himself seemed in turn to cast him off. In his utter helplessness and in his terror of the dark waters surging round him, he cried to the Lord. He felt that not only was his body drowning, but his soul also. He seemed to himself to have gone down to the very roots of the mountains, those dark and awful places of

which it is not possible even to think without a shudder.

‘The waters compassed me about, even to the soul :
The deep was round about me ;
The weeds were wrapped about my head.
I went down to the bottom of the mountains ;
The earth with her bars closed upon me for ever :
Yet hast thou brought up my life from the pit, O
Lord my God.’

Even in this strange darkness he realized that he had at least been saved from death, and his soul awoke to remorse for his disobedience. At last he was ready to do the will of God.

With repentance came deliverance, and Jonah found himself cast upon dry land.

Again he heard the voice of God : ‘Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee.’ Without a murmur, Jonah obeyed.

So vast was Nineveh that it is described as a three days’ journey to pass through it. For a day Jonah travelled, and then raised his voice crying : ‘Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.’ And as his word passed from mouth to mouth repentance swept like a flood over the city. It

was not of idolatry that they were accused, but of evil-doing and evil-living, and every man's heart smote him for the things he had done. The king arose from off his throne, and, putting aside his gorgeous robes of State, he covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. He commanded that not only all his people, but the very beasts of the field, should do the same. All evil must be put away from them, and they must fast and 'cry mightily' to God.

When the cry of this innumerable people came up to God like one voice, He had mercy, and withheld the destruction He had threatened.

Jonah had uttered his warning unwillingly, hoping that the thing he feared would not, after all, come to pass. Now that he saw his words accepted, he was filled with a bitterness like the bitterness of death, and implored God to take his life, for he could suffer it no longer. God answered very gently: 'Doest thou well to be angry?' But Jonah, still possessed by his resentment, passed out of the city whose very grief was intolerable to him. Making himself a little shelter on the eastern side, he sat down sourly to watch what would come of it all.

As he sat in his flimsy, insufficient shelter, the scorching sun beat upon him, and God caused a gourd to grow miraculously from the ground. It spread its leaves like a wild vine, and Jonah was glad of its cool shadow. Night came and went, but with the morning light the gourd began to wither, for God had caused a worm to eat the root. And when the sun had risen, a sultry wind blew from the east. Jonah, panting beneath the burning heat, said to himself once more: 'It is better for me to die than to live.'

Again came the voice of God asking gently: 'Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd?' and Jonah answered stubbornly: 'I do well to be angry, even unto death.'

Then said the Lord: 'Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night. And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city; wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?'

Not a word more is added, for not another word is necessary. If Jonah for selfish reasons

could lament the death of the gourd that had shaded him, and which had grown up without his having to lift a finger, what of the sorrow of God over these multitudes He had created, seeing that even the beasts of the field were dear to Him? If Jonah longed so desperately for the life of the gourd, how deep the longing in the infinite heart of God for the lives of His penitent children! Surely mercy is greater than justice. In spite of the cruelty of the kingdom of Assyria, in spite of the crimes that cried to heaven, vengeance was but a poor and ugly thing. God sought reconciliation with all the peoples of the earth if they would but turn to the fulfilling of His will.

But behind this lay another lesson, which the Jews were slow to learn. If God had singled them out to be His own in a special way, and had sent them great leaders and great teachers, what was His purpose? That they should grow proud and contemptuous and narrow-minded? God's will was the reverse of all this. Having learnt the truth, they must be ready to pass it on to their neighbours; having received privileges, they must make use of them for their enemies.

So you see how this story, which may have seemed to you a little of a fairy-tale, opens out like an exquisite rose till you find in the heart of it the glowing crimson of the love of God. Not poor and selfish like the love of man, but wide and infinite and tender, not despising the humblest creature He has made.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE STORY OF DANIEL

EZEKIEL XIV, XXVIII. DANIEL I—II, IV—VI, XII.

WHEN the prophet Ezekiel was trying to bring home to the people that no man is saved through another's righteousness, he declared that, though Noah, Daniel, and Job were within the land, their righteousness would be counted to no man save themselves. Again, later in his book, when he is describing the pride of the prince of Tyre, he says: 'Behold, thou art wiser than Daniel; there is no secret they can hide from thee.' Daniel was evidently some great Jew, well known to his people for his righteousness and his wisdom, and yet we hear nothing more of him until a book bearing his name came to be known many, many years later, when the last of the writing prophets had finished his work.

Dark and terrible days had come upon the

Jews. Palestine had been conquered by the Greeks, and in the end had fallen into the hands of the Greek kings of Syria. One of these, Antiochus Epiphanes, wished to make all the people of his empire adopt his own religion. Fearful persecutions were the result, and some of the Jews, through fear, pretended to obey the conqueror. For the most part, however, great courage was shown in resisting this command to worship heathen gods. It appears that it was at this time that these wonderful stories and visions came into the hands of the people.

That this Daniel, who is the hero of the book, and into whose mouth the visions are put, is indeed the same as the man of whom Ezekiel spoke, we cannot be sure. But the stories are full of Divine encouragement to all who suffer for their faith, or have to stand alone against any temptation. The visions reveal God's hand in the course of history, and throb with the expectation of the near coming of the kingdom of the Messiah. The stories and visions together did much to keep the fire of faith burning in the tortured but heroic people, and are still among the most famous in the Bible. Some of these

chapters are difficult to interpret, and you can only understand them when you are older, but a few directly appeal to us all.

We are first introduced to Daniel when a captive at the court of King Nebuchadnezzar, as he is always called in this book, though his real name was Nebuchadrezzar. A number of the young noblemen of Jerusalem had been made prisoners on one of the expeditions against Judah, and it was the king's intention to train the best of them in Babylon for the service of the court. They were placed apart in a building that was half college and half prison. There they were to learn the Chaldean language, and to study. As a fine personal appearance was of value, they were to be well fed with a daily portion from the royal table. After three years their education would be considered complete, and they would enter the king's service.

Among the boys who were chosen for this purpose were four friends, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. New Chaldean names were given to them, that the memory of their nationality might die out. Daniel received the name of Belteshazzar. But though his con-

querors could change his name, he was determined that they should not change his character.

Young as he was, he loved his nation, and had no mind to forget that he was one of God's chosen people, bound by special laws. He therefore decided that he would on no account consent to eat from the king's table, seeing that this would oblige him to take meat forbidden to the Jews. He accordingly appealed to the prince who was the head of the king's pages to allow his three friends and himself to abstain altogether from flesh meat. He knew that they ran no risk of breaking their sacred code if they fed only on vegetables and fruits and grain.

The prince had taken a great liking to Daniel, but he feared to grant this favour. 'I fear my lord the king,' he said, 'who hath appointed your meat and drink: for why should he see your faces worse liking than the youths which are of your own age? so should ye endanger my head with the king.' There was nothing more to be done in this direction. But Daniel did not give up hope. He turned his attention to the steward of the pages, with whom he had more to do, and proposed this plan. Let these four friends be

fed as they desired for ten days, and then let the result be tested. Permission was given, and at the end of the time the four young Hebrews looked healthier and stronger than all their companions. This settled the difficulty. Daniel's tact and courage won consent to continue as they had begun. In the heart of the king's palace, he was as loyal to God as he had been in his father's house in Jerusalem.

The four friends were not content with being good Jews, but were also conscientious in their work. They used to the full every opportunity of gaining knowledge, and learned quickly. The result was that, when they finished what we may call their college life, they were not merely the handsomest, but the best informed and most capable of all their fellows. Indeed, they had shot past their teachers. When the king sought their help, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his realm.

So Daniel won his first victory, and stood faithful to his conscience. It may not seem an important matter whether flesh is prepared in one way or another. But the Jews thought

then, as they do now, that God had given them instructions upon this matter, which must be obeyed. Daniel was none the less a hero because heroic over a small matter.

But he was more than a hero : he was prudent. Instead of irritating the officers set over him, he won their interest, and, by proposing a testing-time of ten days, he gained their consent to an unheard-of request. We do not know whether to admire Daniel most for his indifference to rich food, or his fidelity to his religion, or his skill in securing an unusual favour. Be brave for God and the right, but be brave in the wisest way. To stir up needless persecution is not a proof of high courage. It only shows a man to be a blunderer.

Daniel and his friends were duly enrolled among the wise men of Babylon, who were the scientists and philosophers of that day. Part of their work was to interpret dreams and omens, and to assist the king with their advice when required. It was not long before Daniel was called to do a prophet's work in the Babylonian palace.

'There came a night when Nebuchadnezzar

had a dream, which troubled him so much that he started up from his sleep with a horrible sense of fear. But all trace of the vision had vanished from his mind, save the terror it had caused. Calling the wise men to his aid, he commanded them first to recall to him his dream, and then to unfold its meaning. They protested that this was more than the greatest magician could undertake. Let the king tell them the dream, then they would interpret it. Otherwise they were powerless. In a fit of anger the king ordered that all his wise men should be put to death, and their houses pulled down. An enchanter who could not recall a forgotten dream was an enchanter not worth having.

Daniel and his companions had not been consulted, perhaps because of the jealousy of the other wise men ; but when the decree went forth they were sought out with the others to be put to death. Daniel then asked that a little respite should be given until he saw if he could disclose the dream and its meaning. With his three friends he set himself to pray for God's help. He was quite sure that heavenly wisdom could succeed, though earthly wisdom had failed.

In the darkness of the night the secret was revealed to them. Daniel's heart was full of thanksgiving. He did not rush from his knees, forgetting to thank God, but said : 'Blessed be the name of God for ever and ever, for wisdom and might are His. . . . I thank Thee and praise Thee, O Thou God of my fathers, who hast given me wisdom and might, and hast now made known to me what we desired of Thee ; for Thou hast made known to us the king's matter.'

When day had come, Daniel demanded that the wise men of Babylon should not be slain, for if brought before the king, he could declare both the dream and its interpretation. His demand being quickly granted, his first care was to impress upon the king that it was God in heaven who had revealed this secret. With real humility, Daniel at once dismissed the idea that, because of his own superior wisdom, he could do what others had failed to do. He was there only because it was God's will that the king should know what this terrifying dream meant.

Then he proceeded to describe it. Nebuchadnezzar had beheld a great image, probably much

like the gigantic statues of the gods he worshipped. It had one noticeable peculiarity. It was made of several different metals. The head was of gold, the shoulders and arms of silver, the body of brass, the legs of iron, and the feet of iron and clay together. As he looked, a great stone, which apparently came from no human hand, crashed upon the image, shattering it to pieces, so that the wind carried away the fragments. Then the destroying stone grew till it became a great mountain which filled the earth.

This was the dream, and then followed the interpretation. The golden head was the empire of Nebuchadnezzar. The silver, the brass, and the iron were the succeeding empires which should in turn hold the chief power in the world. The mingling of the brittle clay with the iron showed that the last of these kingdoms should be weakened by division. When all these kingdoms had in turn been supreme, God Himself would set up a kingdom, which, like the stone in the dream, should overthrow all the others, and grow so great that there would be no room for any other empire on the whole earth.

This was a vision of the kingdom of the Messiah
Whose power was in due time to conquer the
world.

When Nebuchadnezzar had heard Daniel to the end, a great burden was lifted from him ; he was deeply moved. Daniel's powers filled him with amazement. Thinking him little less than a god, he fell at his feet worshipping him, declaring the God of the Jews to be above all gods. Then he appointed Daniel and his friends his chief ministers in the province of Babylon. How high the young exile had climbed ! But it was a giddy pinnacle on which to stand. It was harder now to honour God and to be fearless for the truth. His courage was soon to be severely tried.

It was not long before the king had another dream. When he awoke this time, the vision was quite clear to his mind, but its meaning baffled him. In his sleep he had seen a great tree whose top seemed to touch the heavens, and whose roots spread out to the ends of the earth. The leaves and the fruit of it gave shelter and food to all the beasts of the field, and the birds of the air made their homes in its branches.

Then appeared a watcher, a holy one from heaven, crying : ' Hew down the tree, and cut off his branches, shake off his leaves and scatter his fruit : let the beasts depart from under it, and the birds from its branches. Nevertheless, let the stump of his roots remain in the earth, even with a band of iron and of brass, in the tender grass of the field ; and let it be wet with the dew of heaven, and let his portion be with the beasts in the grass of the earth : let his heart be changed from a man's, and let a beast's heart be given unto him ; and let seven times pass over him.'

When Daniel heard the king's dream, he was astonished and deeply troubled. There was a real tie of friendship between the two, and the king, to encourage him, said—using, of course, his Chaldean name—' Belteshazzar, let not the dream and its interpretation trouble thee.' Daniel, however, was not thinking of himself, but of the king. With his customary grace of speech, which made him an accomplished courtier while a steadfast believer, he answered : ' My lord, the dream be to them that hate thee, and the interpretation thereof to thine adversaries.' With this broad hint that no friend of the king's could take any

pleasure in hearing what he had to say, he unfolded the dark meaning of the vision.

The mighty tree was Nebuchadnezzar himself, the greatness of whose Power seemed to reach to the heavens and stretched to the ends of the earth. A fearful fate was approaching him. He should be removed from his high place, just as the tree was cut down. Losing his reason, and thinking himself a beast of the field, he would live like a beast, and not like a man. But a pale ray of hope was granted. The stump left in the ground, and protected so that it might spring again, signified that his kingdom would be restored to him when he had acknowledged the Lord to be the ruler over all men and the disposer of kingdoms. ‘Thy kingdom shall be sure to thee,’ said Daniel, ‘after that thou shalt have known that the heavens do rule.’

It was not a time for many words. If this dream could not change Nebuchadnezzar, no sermon would touch him; but Daniel could not forbear to plead with the king. Greatly daring, but with perfect tact, he said: ‘Wherefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable unto thee, and break off thy sins by righteousness, and thine iniquities

by showing mercy to the poor ; if there may be a lengthening of thy tranquillity.'

Daniel knew his words would be in vain. There are so many means whereby a king may blunt his conscience. Besides, days passed and nothing happened. The first sharp wound of fear was soon healed. Everything went on as before, and the dream faded from his mind. For once Daniel's wisdom seemed discredited. But one day as the king walked in his palace, looking out over his wonderful city, and filled with pride in its gorgeousness, he cried out vaingloriously : ' Is not this great Babylon, which I have built for the royal dwelling-place, by the might of my power, and for the glory of my majesty ? ' He had not finished his proud speech when the curse fell upon him. His reason left him, and he became mad with that horrible form of madness which makes a man imagine himself to be a wolf or, as in this case, an ox, and act like one.

But while thinking himself a beast, he remained a man. The day came when he could think again, and his first clear thought was of God's greatness and his own foolish pride. Raising his eyes to heaven, he gave honour to the Lord, the Only

One. Great king as he once had been, he knew what the King of Gods must be. ‘None can stay His hand or say unto Him, “What doest Thou?”’ cried the humbled monarch. Then his throne was restored to him, and his power became still greater than before.

There is no mention in the inscriptions of Babylon of this calamity coming upon the great king. Some people think that it is a picture of the folly of great conquerors, who so often fight and labour and rule as if they were to live for ever. No sooner do they die than their empires crumble, or split into fragments: sometimes, indeed, before they die. Alexander the Great died a drunken death before he reached mid-age. Napoleon the Great lost empire, army, and even his home. Both had acted as if no power in earth or heaven could overthrow them, as if they were gods and not men. They were in a real sense both mad.

And it was a kind of madness which made Nebuchadnezzar so busy conquering and building, while he failed hopelessly to make his empire secure. Only a few years after his death, Cyrus entered the mighty capital without striking a blow at its massive walls. The teaching is clear,

whether this king really lived like a beast of the field or not. Every ruler, however great, is in the hands of the infinitely Greater One, the Only One, Who, at any moment, can hurl earth's rulers from their place.

The crash came when a king called Belshazzar occupied the throne. He was called 'son of Nebuchadnezzar,' but was really the son of a usurper of the throne. It might well be, however, that he was a descendant of Nebuchadnezzar, and of course he would make the most of any connection with that great ruler, unlike him though he was.

One day, as Belshazzar feasted his nobles in the splendid dining-hall of his palace, he remembered the gold and silver cups taken from the Temple of Jerusalem by him he delighted to call his father. The profane thought came to him to use these sacred vessels at his feast. They were brought to the table, and he and his wives and his nobles drank from them, and gave praise to their idols as they drank. Fool of a king ! he thought the poor, conquered God of the Jews was but another slave to add splendour to his banquet.

But suddenly the king was struck with deadly terror. Upon the great wall before his eyes mysterious fingers were tracing out strange words. A hand, and nothing but a hand! Whose hand? This was the awful question that paled his flushed face, and made his knees knock together as if he shivered in an icy wind. He cried out for the diviners, the enchanters, and the soothsayers. Let them come in their multitude, that this hideous nightmare of fear might be dispelled.

But they were dumb before these letters of fire. The secret was inexorable, and this was no hour for trickery. The king had offered a great reward—a robe of purple, a chain of gold, and the government of a third of the kingdom; but the boldest stared at the mystic letters in vain.

As the king's alarm increased, and the feast was thrown into confusion, the queen, hearing the outcry, entered the banqueting-hall. Her quick woman's mind proposed a last attempt. Let Daniel be called, the favourite diviner of Nebuchadnezzar. He could declare the mystery. In her excitement she poured out praise

of this master of magicians before the anguished king.

As soon as Daniel stood amid the revellers, who had been so suddenly disturbed, Belshazzar appealed to him in a most flattering manner to read these baffling words. He repeated his promise of a great reward. 'Let thy gifts be to thyself, and give thy rewards to another,' was Daniel's harsh answer. He had no courtesies for the profaner of the vessels of the Lord. The king was, in his eyes, already dead, and the thought of gifts from a doomed man absurd. Not as a diviner, but as the Lord's prophet, he stood there to tell the coming judgment.

Sternly he reminded the king of the punishment sent upon Nebuchadnezzar for his vain-glory and forgetfulness of God. He, indeed, had repented. But what of Belshazzar? He had not only failed to humble himself before the Lord, but had insulted Him, using the sacred vessels from the Temple to make merry with his friends, praising their gods as they drank. Daniel halts in his burning rebuke to dwell on this idol-worship: 'Thou hast praised the gods of silver and gold, of brass, iron, wood, and stone, which

see not, nor hear, nor know, and the God in Whose hand thy breath is, and Whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified.'

Then he turned to the interpretation of the words inscribed upon the wall. They were from God, he declared. 'Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin.' 'Mene (numbered) : God hath numbered thy kingdom, and brought it to an end. Tekel (weighed) : thou art weighed in the balances, and found wanting. Peres (divided, singular of pharsin ; *u* means *and*) : thy kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.' No word of pity or pleading fell from Daniel. There was no room for repentance. Belshazzar's fate was sealed.

The king insisted on keeping his promise. Perhaps it was his way of defying fate. Daniel was clothed in purple, and the gold chain was thrown about his neck, and he was proclaimed governor of the third of the kingdom. None the less, that very night Belshazzar was slain, and Darius the Mede took the throne.

No trace of this story is found in history, but even if the letters had not been seen upon the wall, they would have been there. Over the

door of many a king's palace God has had to write 'Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin,' though no eyes discerned them. There is scarcely a commoner proverbial saying than this concerning the 'writing on the wall,' and rightly so. Every ruler who profanes sacred things and neglects God's will might read the same terrible sentences above his throne were he but wise to mark God's verdicts. God is not mocked. Many a kingdom has been wrecked for just such sins as those of Belshazzar's.

Daniel must have been an aged man when Belshazzar died, and might well have claimed a resting time. But he was too conspicuous, especially after his last deed, to be left in retirement. Indeed, now he reached the summit of life's splendours, being placed next Darius himself. You can understand how jealously the one hundred and twenty presidents and satraps, as the Persians called their governors, regarded him. But, watch as they might, they could not find any ground for an accusation against him. Soon they saw that they could only injure Daniel through his religion.

They made a deep-laid plot to compel Darius

to slay him. This was their plan. They persuaded the king to pass a law enacting that, for thirty days only, no request should be made of god or man, save of the king only. Anyone offending was to be thrown to the lions. It seems a rather absurd regulation to us, but to an Eastern monarch it was the finest form of flattery. For one month he was to be set above all others, even above the gods. No worship would come to them, but all petitions must be made to him. It was no wonder that Darius yielded to the request.

The satraps were quite right when they thought that now they had Daniel in their net. He made no change whatever in his habits. It was his custom to pray three times a day in a chamber with the window opened towards Jerusalem—not that he thought God lived there, but it was the sacred city, and God's holy place was in it. When he heard of the decree he did just as before, making no attempt to conceal his actions. That would have been to play the traitor and deny God.

Spies were on the watch, and in a very short time Darius was informed that his decree must

be put in force against his favourite governor. At once the king saw through the whole scheme, but, plan as he might, he could not see how to evade his own law. The laws of the Medes and Persians were unalterable. Daniel must be given to the lions. There was one faint hope in the king's heart. As he parted from Daniel, he said: 'Thy God Whom thou servest continually, He will deliver thee.' But the howling of the wild beasts made the words sound like cruel mockery.

The satraps saw to it that the work was done thoroughly. When Daniel had been cast into the den, a stone was placed upon its mouth and sealed with the king's signet. The governor was not to have a chance of his life, even if he could keep the wild beasts at bay till nightfall.

The king could not rest that night. He spent it like a mourner, fasting, and without music to fill the long sleepless hours. Early in the morning he could rest no longer, and hurrying to the den, he cried in a lamentable voice: 'O Daniel, servant of the living God, is thy God, Whom thou servest continually, able to deliver thee from the lions?' Hope and fear struggled

within him as he listened. Then came a muffled voice, from the den beneath. It was Daniel, courteous and calm as if in the king's palace: 'O king, live for ever. My God hath sent His angel, and hath shut the lions' mouths, and they have not hurt me: forasmuch as before Him innocence was found in me; and also before thee, O king, have I done no hurt.' The king was exceeding glad. Immediately Daniel was released from the den, and his worst enemies and, alas! their wives and families, were hurled to the cruel doom their victim had just escaped.

We are told that Darius was so much impressed by Daniel's deliverance that he sent a decree through all his empire commanding men everywhere to hold the God of Daniel in utmost awe. It was Daniel's last sharp trial. He lived to a great age, and was honoured even by King Cyrus when the reins of power passed into his hands.

When you are older you can study for yourself the visions which make up the rest of the Book of Daniel. But one of these sayings you can understand now. In the last chapter we read: 'And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and

some to shame and everlasting contempt.' This is the first clear mention in the Old Testament of the resurrection from the dead. It reminds us that God was still teaching His people more of His truth, and was preparing them to receive His dear Son, Who said: 'I am the Resurrection and the Life.'

CHAPTER XXX

JOHN THE BAPTIST

ST. MATT. III. ST. MARK VI. ST. LUKE I, III, VII.
ST. JOHN I, III, V.

JOHN THE BAPTIST is the first figure in the New Testament to meet our eyes, but he really belongs to the Old Testament. He is not the first of our Lord's disciples, but the last of His forerunners. He belongs, not to the Apostles, but to the prophets.

Four hundred years had passed since Malachi and Joel had prophesied, and yet John was much more akin to them than to the rabbis and scribes and priests of his own day. He modelled himself on Elijah, the stern prophet from wild Gilead, simple in dress and direct in speech. He gathered disciples, as Isaiah had done, and formed them into a fellowship. Like Ezekiel and Hosea and Malachi, he cried, 'Turn ye, turn ye,' which

is the Hebrew way of saying ‘Repent.’ He declared that the Kingdom of God was at hand and the day of the Lord was near. These, as you will remember, were the words so often on the lips of the prophets.

The Jews had suffered much, and had changed a good deal during the centuries since Joel ceased to prophesy. They had borne the fiercest persecution most heroically, and had clung to their law, their sacred books, and their ancient customs, as a drowning man clings to the spar which is his sole hope amid the wild waters. They had dreamed great dreams of a coming king who would finally deliver them from their oppressors, and establish a kingdom which could defy even the might of the Romans. More and more their leaders had come to interpret the promises of the prophets in an earthly and outward way. Also, little by little, many of them had come to think that their chief duty was to attend to the tithes, and the prayers, and the sacrifices, and the Sabbaths. They were so taken up with the outward things that somehow they failed to remember that the prophets had constantly spoken of simpler, deeper duties — of

honesty and kindness, justice and mercy, the fear of the Lord and the love of man.

There was no longer any fear that the Jews would learn idolatry or vice from the pagan nations. They had successfully resisted the efforts both of the Greeks and of the Romans to alter their worship and destroy their national faith. They were far less fickle than of old, and had become intensely proud of their law and their religion. But at the same time most of them had grown narrower and fiercer, and less clear-sighted as to God's real requirements.

Just as men in Amos' day thought that they were pleasing God, although all manner of oppression and wickedness abounded, because they offered such good sacrifices and kept the feast-days: so in the Baptist's day the Jews thought that all was well because they were so particular in keeping the Sabbath and the Passover, and in paying their tithes most exactly. They were almost as startled as the Northern Kingdom had been at Amos' rebukes, when the Baptist began to cry to all passers-by in the wilderness roads: 'Repent, repent.' This new prophet had the same work to do as the old

prophets. He had to convince people who were content and well pleased with themselves that they were wrong and displeasing to God.

In one way only John differed from the ancient prophets. He baptized his disciples—that is, he bathed them in running water—when they joined his comradeship. The Jews had long been accustomed to bathing for the removal of ceremonial uncleanness. If they had touched the dead, or in some other way had become what was called ‘unclean,’ they were forbidden to worship until they had washed in a particular way.

The prophets had seldom referred to these customs. They were as unimportant to them as the sacrifices. What they cared about was the clean heart and the pure soul. But John did a wise and beautiful thing. He took this custom of bathing and made it signify the forsaking of real sin. It was an impressive way of making people think at least as much of the sins of their heart as of the blunders in their religious ceremonial. This was the Baptist's great new idea.

We know but little of his early training, but



D. Anderson.

JOHN THE BAPTIST.

AFTER THE STATUE BY DONATELLO IN THE MUSEO NAZIONALE, FLORENCE.

his father **Zacharias** was a good old priest, and his mother **Elisabeth** was the friend and confidant of **Mary**, the mother of our **Lord**. She must therefore have been a beautiful soul. And he was a heaven-sent child.

It was the custom for the priests to take it in turn to offer incense in the holy place, and as they were very many, it sometimes happened that this honour came to a priest but once in all his years of service. At this great moment in **Zacharias'** life an angel appeared to him and promised him a son who would be a second **Elijah** and the herald of the **Messiah**. The priest was old, and finding it difficult to believe this promise, asked for a sign. He was told that he would be dumb until the child was born. When **Zacharias** came out to the waiting people, who were full of curiosity and anxiety because of his long delay, he found he could not say a word to them. He went home to dwell in silence.

In due time the son was born, and when the neighbours asked the mother to tell them the child's name she answered, 'John,' which is a shortened form of **Johanan**, meaning 'The **Lord** is gracious.' **Zacharias** had been bidden by the

angel to give this name to the boy. When the neighbours protested because no other in the family had borne the name, Zacharias signed to them to bring writing materials, and wrote: 'His name is John.'

No sooner had he done this than his voice returned, and he burst forth into the hymn of praise you know so well. It is called the *Benedictus*, from the Latin for its opening word, 'Blessed.' In it he poured out all the holy thoughts and expectations which had been in his mind during those long months when he was speechless. He knew that his son was to be a prophet, for he said: 'Yea, and thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to make ready His ways; to give knowledge of salvation unto the people in the remission of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the dayspring from on high shall visit us, to shine upon them that sit in darkness, and in the shadow of death; to guide our feet into the way of peace.'

With such a father and mother, and such a blessing on his birth, we do not wonder when

we read that 'he waxed strong in spirit.' That must mean that he had a great deal of character, and early knew God for himself.

Like Samuel, he was a dedicated child from his birth ; like Samuel, too, though born a priest, he was called to be a prophet. The ceremonies and sacrifices and services of the Temple did not attract him. He was more deeply aware of God's presence in the bare open spaces of the wilderness of Judæa, where Amos had kept his sheep. There, in solitude, where the sky seemed so vast and the earth so small, and the stars looked down upon him like a thousand watchful eyes, he spent long years in thought and prayer.

He had no home ties, for his aged mother and father must soon have died, and he troubled himself little as to food and clothing. Like Elijah, he wore a garment of camel's skin girt about with a leathern belt. His food consisted of wild honey and the beans of the carob-tree, which were sometimes called 'locusts.' Thus, beholden to no one, and with his mind stored with the words of the prophets, he lived alone, seeking to know God's will for the nation he loved.

At last, when he was about thirty years of age,

he knew that the time had come to speak. He saw with painful clearness that his people needed most of all to learn humility and penitence. Apart in the wilderness though he was, the sins of Jerusalem were written upon his heart—hypocrisy, pride, self-satisfaction. He knew himself to be the messenger of whom Malachi had spoken, who was to proclaim a day of judgment before the coming of the Lord. The axe laid to the root of the tree, the fire burning up the chaff—these were the stern pictures he flashed before his hearers' eyes. Of the coming King he said little save that He would bring the winnowing fan to separate the chaff from the wheat, before the chaff was consumed in the quenchless flames.

Up and down the lonely desert roads there passed occasional companies of travellers—soldiers, merchants, pilgrims journeying to the Passover. To them this gaunt man in his strange dress became a familiar figure. His cry, 'Repent, repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand,' with its piercing accent of reality, haunted their ears even when they passed on to the busy towns.

It was the common people, the working folk, who were first won by him. His plain words, so

different from the fine-spun and tangled teaching of the Scribes and Pharisees, came home to them.

They crowded round him, asking, ‘What shall we do?’ He had a ready word of practical rebuke for every inquirer. To the soldiers, often grumbling about their pay, and ready to rob and steal where they safely could, he answered: ‘Be content with your wages; do violence to no man.’ To the tax-gatherers, grasping and oppressive, he said: ‘Extort no more than is your due.’ The ordinary folk, conscious of no particular sin, but startled by his almost savage rebuke, ‘O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?’ came to ask their duty. Practical love, was his answer. ‘He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath food, let him do likewise.’

Soon his name was known all over Judæa and Galilee, and many were baptized as his disciples. Priests and Levites were sent out from Jerusalem to examine concerning this strange preacher, whose influence was widening day by day. Excitement was fast rising. The question often asked was: ‘Can this be the Christ?’ It was not

John's fault that people cherished such a thought. As soon as the rumour reached him he cried : 'I indeed baptize you with water ; but He that cometh after me is mightier than I, the latchet of Whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose: He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire.'

He made no claim for himself. All honours were to be kept for the King Whose humble herald he was. When the investigators from Jerusalem began to cross-question him concerning himself, saying, 'Who art thou ?' his answers grew shorter and more emphatic with every inquiry. 'I am not the Christ.' 'What then ? art thou Elijah ?' 'I am not.' 'Art thou the prophet ?' 'No.' Baffled and exasperated, his questioners pressed him further : 'Who art thou ? that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself ?' Then the humble prophet answered : 'I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, " Make straight the way of the Lord," as said Isaiah the prophet.' That was all—just a voice, a nameless, warning voice. He asked no title for himself.

This committee of inquiry had come at the

right time, for only a few weeks before had come the day of days to the Baptist. Among those who had presented themselves to be baptized came One from Nazareth. John did not recognize Him, though he had known Him as a child, but he had only to look at Him to see His perfect goodness. Often the preacher of repentance had scanned the faces of the crowds around him, and had seen the marks of selfishness, greed, and impurity. In this face shone unstained holiness. He answered His appeal for baptism by a refusal: 'I have need to be baptized of Thee, and comest Thou to me?' But the Stranger would not be denied. 'Suffer it now,' was His reply, 'for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness.' He had no sins to forsake, but the hour had come for Him to be consecrated to his great career, and there was no better way than this.

Then John baptized Him, and as He came up from the water God's approval was declared. To His own, and to John's wondering eyes, the heavens were opened; they beheld a radiant presence, like a dove of light, all brightness and yet all gentleness, descend upon Him, and a voice sounded in their ears: 'This is My beloved Son,

in Whom I am well pleased.' In that moment John knew that the Stranger was none other than the long-expected One of Whom the prophets had spoken through the centuries. At last the long years of waiting were past. The Messiah had come. It was Jesus, the carpenter of Nazareth, and the very Son of God, Who had stooped to baptism.

How quiet the beginning was! The angels had sung on the night of His birth. Now, when about to begin His infinite task of saving the world, only Himself and one other beheld any marvel. For all others He was but a young workman from Galilee, Who after baptism had mingled again with the crowd.

John did not raise the standard of the Messiah, nor press forward to proclaim Him to the multitude. He waited for God's leading. He told the priests from Jerusalem that the Great One stood among the crowd, and next day, when Jesus passed in His workman's dress, the prophet gave Him a beautiful new name. Turning to some of his disciples who stood near him, he said: 'Behold the Lamb of God, Who taketh away the sin of the world.'

Then, telling of the vision of the dove, he gave Jesus highest honour in presence of them all. But John's disciples were dazed at the suddenness of his tidings. They could not bring themselves to believe that this poorly clad workman could be the Messiah.

The Baptist waited quietly till next day, when Jesus again passed by him. Then he cried as before, 'Behold the Lamb of God!' Upon this two of his disciples quietly turned and followed Jesus. From that day they were won. They were the first of the innumerable multitudes who have followed the Christ. The great work of saving the world was at last begun. Jesus came not as the storm-wind, or earthquake, or fire, but as the still small voice. He was like the dew upon the ground. None hear it come: none see it fall. Men only know its presence when its work is well begun.

It may surprise you that John did not himself become a follower of Jesus, but, as I have told you, he was the last of the prophets, not the first of the disciples. He had his prophetic work to complete. There was still much ploughing of the barren land to be done before the seed could be

fully sown. He continued more earnestly than ever to cry, 'Repent, the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!' He went on gathering disciples, but only that they might be prepared to follow Jesus. None rejoiced more than he when they passed on to the new Leader. He declared, 'He must increase, and I must decrease,' and turned afresh to rebuke sin, that the Christ might come into His own.

But he had not long to work. In the gloomy castle of Machærus, on the edge of the wilderness where he lived and preached, Herod, the governor of Galilee, often made his home. Hearing of the preacher who so moved the people, he himself desired to listen to him, and had him brought to his fortress. There the Baptist spoke as bravely as when by the roadside. His words stirred the worldly king; conscience awoke: wrong things in his life were put right: it almost seemed as if the prophet of the wilderness were to win his chief disciple within the palace of a king.

There was, however, one sin which Herod would not forsake. He had taken his brother's wife, Herodias, to be his queen, and John would not let the sin go unrebuked. Just as he had spoken

plainly to the soldiers and the tax-gatherers and the country folk, so now he spoke to the king. Then, as Jezebel had attacked Elijah, Herodias attacked John, and he was imprisoned. But the king's favour was not wholly withdrawn. The prisoner was allowed to see his friends, and his disciples often visited him.

There had always been some who had been jealous for John's fame, and discontented because of the increasing popularity of Jesus. This was not the Messiah they had expected, not the Messiah Whom their master had taught them to expect. There was no sign of the axe and the winnowing fan and the consuming flame of judgment. This carpenter from Nazareth preached love, and was for ever busy healing the sick in body and spirit.

At last their doubts troubled their leader. For their sakes, if not for his own, these doubts must be dispelled. He sent two of his disciples to find out Jesus and put one simple question to Him: 'Art Thou He that should come, or look we for another ?'

Jesus knew all that was in John's mind, and answered accordingly. He let the prophet's

friends stand by Him while He did His blessed work, healing, lightening, cheering the sick and poor. Then He bade them go back and tell what they had seen. John could be trusted to understand that such power must be of God, and to convince his disciples.

That was the last service he could render the Messiah to Whom he had so gladly given the foremost place. Death was at hand, and death by violence.

On a great feast-day in Machærus, Herod and his nobles were delighted by an unexpected and entrancing entertainment. The young princess Salome, the daughter of Herodias, came and danced before them ere the feast ended. Excited by her skill and beauty, Herod swore that he would give her anything she asked, even to the half of his kingdom. He treated her like a common dancing-girl, dancing for a reward. In truth, she was no better. From her mother she learned what to ask—the head of their enemy, the Baptist.

The king was quickly sobered at this ferocious request from such young lips. He was deeply troubled, too. He knew the goodness of this

prophet and admired his courage, and had felt God speaking through him as through no other. But he dared not draw back. In that hour, and without a moment's preparation, John was hurried to the block ; the swordsman did his work ; and his bleeding head upon a charger was given into the hands of the young girl.

So died the last of the prophets. But I doubt not that he died content. His work was done. God's great gift to the nation and to the world had been bestowed. The Messiah was come.

John's disciples took up his poor, headless body, and laid it in a tomb. But it was Jesus Who spoke his epitaph, which has gone to the ends of the earth, 'Of those born of women, none greater than John.' He was so true, so brave, so strong, and above all, so selfless. None of the prophets did a greater work : none so moved the whole nation : none did as much to prepare the way of the Lord : no other was so well remembered.

And yet Jesus added another sentence which will sound strangely in your ears : 'The least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than John.' How can that be ? For this reason. Every

Christian, however humble, knows the perfect love of God, for Jesus has died and risen again. That mystery of love could not be fully revealed until the cross was reared upon Calvary. It is the greatest truth in the world. To know it, so as to live in its light, is to be greater than the last and greatest of the prophets, from whose eyes such perfect love was hidden.

Therefore his light, bright as it was, pales before that of his Lord, Who said of him : 'He was the lamp that *burneth* and shineth.' The beams from his lantern shone strong and clear, but they could not last. The oil which fed the flames quickly burned away. But He Who said of Himself, 'I am the light of the world,' abides for ever. He is the Sun in the heavens, ever shining, never ending, stronger than all darkness, the very brightness of God.

NOTES ON THE ILLUSTRATIONS

These notes are intended for the use of parents and teachers who may use the book.

Frontispiece.—This is a copy of the chief portion of the frieze upon the walls of the Library in Boston, U.S.A. The two remaining sections are given opposite pp. 382 and 402. The whole forms a very famous work of Mr. John S. Sargent, R.A. (b. 1856). Moses, the central figure, is depicted in symbolic fashion. The other figures are representations of the different prophets, based upon the hints concerning their character found in Scripture, and they will be considered under the head of the separate illustrations. The reader will do well to consider these representations carefully.

Second Picture—Antichrist or False Prophet.—This is a copy of the principal group in the famous fresco in the cathedral of Orvieto from the hand of Signorelli (1450-1523). It represents a figure bearing all the outward marks usually assigned to the Christ, but easily recognized to be His enemy by the evil expression, quite apart from the presence of the devil whispering his suggestions. Signorelli's great conception is that there is an external resemblance, misleading to the careless, between the Christ and the Antichrist, the true prophet and the false.

The heap in front of the daïs on which the figure stands consists of golden ornaments with which to buy the allegiance of his dupes.

Third Picture—Moses.—This statue, originally intended to form an important feature in the great tomb of Pope Julius II., which was never finished, now stands in the Church of S. Pietro in Vincoli in Rome. It is from the chisel of Michael Angelo (1475-1564), and though much criticized on account of the disproportion between the comparatively small head and massive limbs, is one of his most impressive works. It represents the leader of Israel about to rise to rebuke the people—in fact, in a prophetic attitude.

Fourth Picture—Fortitude (Deborah).—This picture is by Alessandro Botticelli (1447-1510), and was painted in his earlier period, when he collaborated with the goldsmith-painter, Pollaiuolo. It is a noble representation of enduring courage, typified by a woman enthroned as a ruler. It lends itself admirably as an imaginative representation of Deborah, the warrior-prophetess of Israel.

Fifth Picture—Samuel anointing David.—This reproduction of the cartoon by Alfred Rethel (1816-1859) is a spirited representation of the closing public act of Samuel. The contrast between the venerable old man and the lithe and sturdy shepherd carrying his beloved harp is very striking.

Sixth Picture—Elijah restoring the Widow's Child.—This reproduction of a water-colour by Ford Madox Brown (1821-1893) is useful rather as a picture of the scene than as an interpretation of the character of Elijah. For a satisfying representation of the rugged energy of that prophet we turn rather to the figure bearing his name in Mr. Sargent's series. But the child himself, languid with

returning life, and still in his death garment, is full of poetry.

Seventh Picture—Elisha raising the Shunammite's Child.—This illustration by Lord Leighton (1830-1896) is also more noticeable for the picture of the child than of the prophet, yet it lays emphasis on the contrast between the energetic life of the old and the smiling death of the young.

Eighth Picture—Hosea.—In this exquisite figure, with half-shrouded face, we read the tragical experience of a soul saved from despair by the vision of the passion of God, and by the call to enter into that infinite experience.

Ninth Picture—Isaiah.—This is a glorious figure, instinct with appeal, yet suggesting by its noble bearing and natural grace the courtier and man of culture.

Tenth Picture—Jeremiah.—In this face we see a striking combination of grief long endured and of courage, renewed with difficulty but without fail. The pain of years has blurred the fine lines of the sensitive features.

Eleventh Picture—Ezekiel.—This picture is, perhaps, the most Jewish in type, and presents a striking contrast to that of Jeremiah. It suggests the triumphant mystic, who, confident in the victory of his ideas, is absorbed in perfecting every detail of his vision.

Twelfth Picture—Micah, Haggai, Malachi, Zechariah.—The contrast in attitude between Micah, who prophesied insistently the destruction of Jerusalem, and the other three prophets, who all did their work in the era of hope after the exile, is clearly marked. Micah half covers his face, bent downward in sorrow. Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi all look upwards as if to the light of the sun-

rising. Note the contrast in age between Haggai and Zechariah is accurately represented. Is it fancy to observe that all three of these later prophets are less massive in feature, representing a certain loss in grandeur of thought and feeling?

Thirteenth Picture—Zephaniah, Joel, Obadiah, and Hosea.—Hosea has already been mentioned, Obadiah represents anguish only half conquered, vision only dimly understood. It is significant that he, the author of the shortest book, a mere fragment of prophetic condemnation, is the only half-length figure in the whole frieze. Joel is a mysterious figure, with face half hidden, perhaps reminding us how difficult it is to form a conception of his personality or to place him in any definite century. Otherwise we must interpret the hidden face as a sign that the picture of desolation is too terrible for him to look upon. Zephaniah is one of the most massive, and at the same time one of the saddest, of all the faces. He is stunned, as it were, with the hopeless calamity he has to foretell. Prophet of the 'Dies Iræ,' he does not thunder, but speaks in hushed and broken accents of the sadness of that day.

Fourteenth Picture—Jonah.—This statue in the church of S. Maria del Popoli, just beneath the Pincian Hill in Rome, is in all probability from the design of Raphael (1483-1520). It is a charming rather than illuminating representation of the prophet. The suggestion is that the prophet's youth and inexperience have caused him to shrink from his great task. Compare the reflective and studious figure in Mr. Sargent's series.

Fifteenth Picture—John the Baptist.—This is one of numerous statues of the Baptist by Donatello (1386-1466). It is in the Bargello, now called the Museo Nazionale, in

Florence, where other representations of this special hero of the artist are found. It is conspicuous by its unflinching realism. The lean, worn form of the ascetic, devoid of any physical charm, is, however, intensely significant in its representation of spiritual force.

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